1998

High wire : risk and the art of tightrope walking

Paul Myrvold
San Jose State University

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

HIGH WIRE:
RISK AND THE ART OF TIGHTROPE WALKING

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Theatre Arts

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

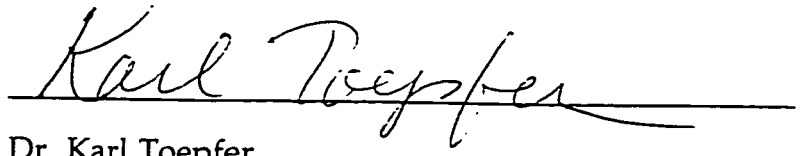
Master of Arts

by

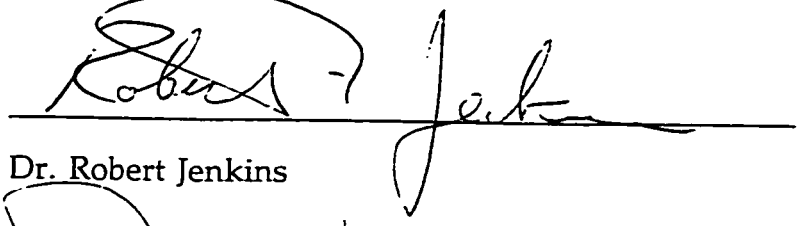
Paul Myrvold

May, 1998

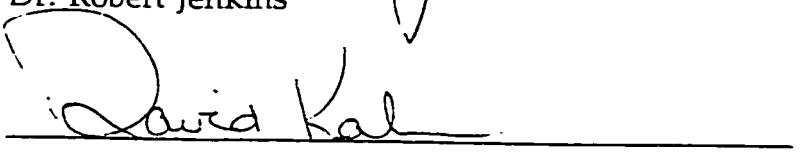
APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS



Dr. Karl Toepfer



Dr. Robert Jenkins



Dr. David Kahn

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

HIGH WIRE: RISK AND THE ART OF TIGHT ROPE WALKING

by Paul Myrvold

This work examines the notion of physical risk as it pertains to performance. Because the act of walking the high wire has become a metaphor for dangerous action as well as a performance skill, this thesis uses it as the standard by which all risk-laden performance can be evaluated. Theories of risk from the fields of commerce, engineering, psychology, and sociology are reviewed as well as the history and practice of wire walking. Specific performances of Philippe Petit, Jay Cochrane, the Wallenda Family, and the author are analyzed in search of the components that shape risk into an aesthetic element of art and the methods used by performers to control it. This thesis also contains complete, unpublished interviews with Philippe Petit and Jay Cochrane as appendices. The final chapter contains theoretic conclusions applicable not only to high wire walking, but to any performance that courts physical injury or death.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges the participation of the following individuals and organizations without whose help this thesis would have been impossible:

Philippe Petit

Jay Cochrane

Mike Wilson—Pacific Attractions International

Consul-General of the People's Republic of China

Very special thanks to Dr. Karl Toepfer whose advice and encouragement sustained the author on this intellectual adventure.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my wife, Sylvia Wallace Myrvold, and children, Susannah Wallace Myrvold, Katherine Regina Myrvold, and Alexander Benedick Myrvold. They supported me in every way, all the way. Don Quixote never had better side-kicks.

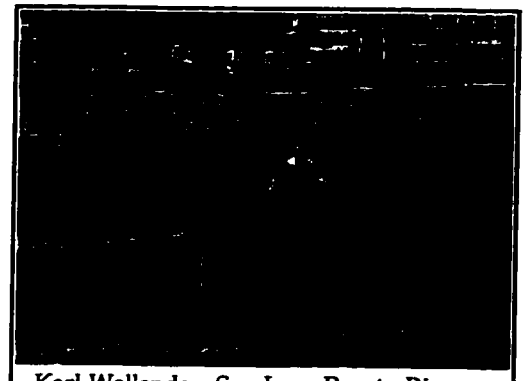
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

The Spectrum of Risk

"...there is no false show of talent; either one falls or one does not fall."
De Goncourts—*Journal*

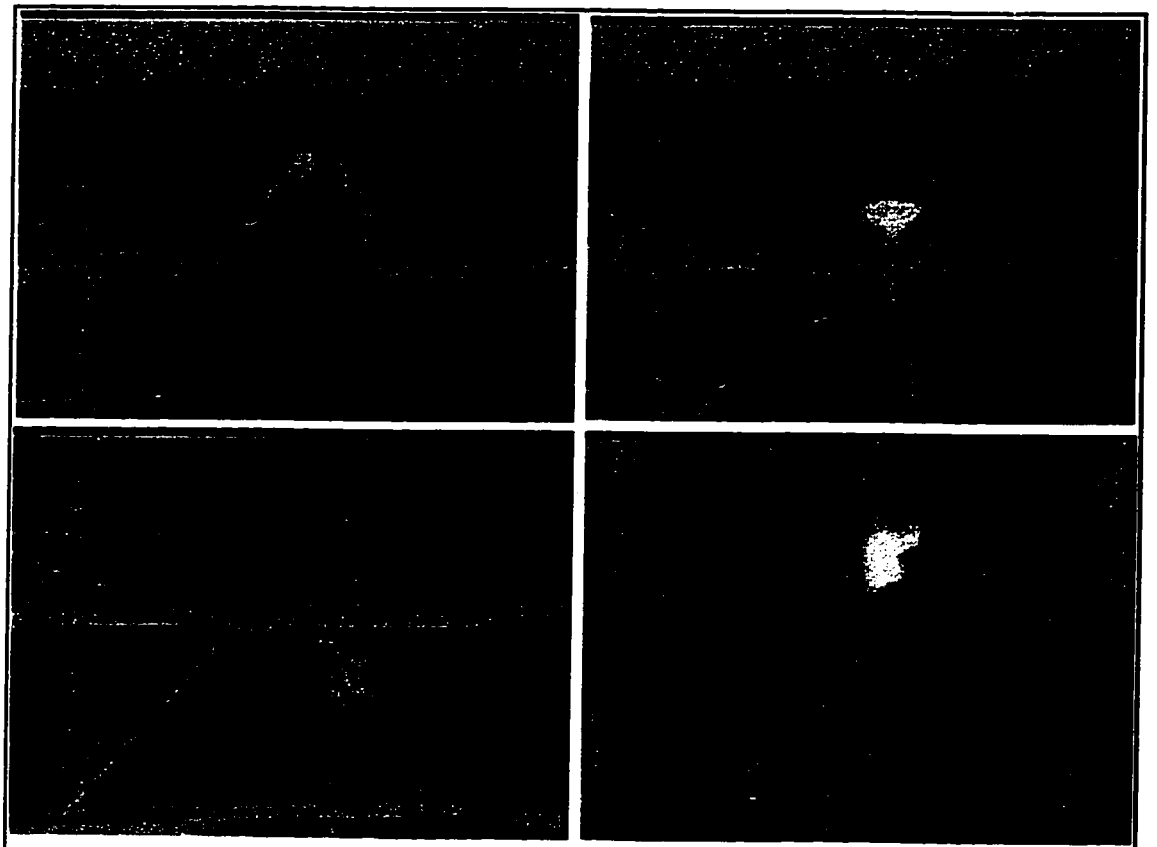
The wire walker is old. Still powerful though stooped, the seventy-three year old, dressed in a white shirt and burgundy pants with a sash tied and dangling at his side, steps out onto the wire strung between two office buildings high above a street in San Juan, Puerto Rico. As he reaches mid-wire, the wind whips the tasseled sash and the wire begins to sway. With his head perfectly still his knees and feet begin to wiggle back and forth as he struggles on the steel cable. The balance pole now dips steeply, first to one side then the other. Teeth bared in a grimace, the master walker fights for control of his perilous world. He slowly bends his knees bringing his body closer to the wire in an attempt to lower the center of gravity and halt the swaying. He lurches forward, his balance pole touching the wire which he grabs with his right hand as he sits for an instant. His pole comes vertical, then slides down toward the pavement far below. Following the pole, he pitches off the side of the wire, his right hand still gripping the thin steel thread. The wire pulls downward with him then rebounds as the walker's weight pops loose his grasp. As he falls to his death, the walker again clutches the pole in seeming



Karl Wallenda—San Juan Puerto Rico (*Daredevils*).

honor of the ancient wire walker injunction to never let go of the balance pole.

Why did Karl Wallenda, patriarch of the most famous wire walking



The Death of Karl Wallenda (*Daredevils*).

family in circus history fall to his death on this day in this particular way? Was it age? There have been wire walkers who were as old or older. Was it creeping carelessness? Pig-headed determination? Egotism? Or did the bill for a lifetime of risk on the high wire come due on a windy, sunny day? Karl Wallenda's grandson, wire walker Enrico Wallenda, spoke to the details in the Arts and Entertainment documentary *Daredevils*:

> He offered to do a sky walk for free. There were several problems. One of them was a rigging problem. The wind

> was blowing real strong. He was seventy-three years old. He had fallen in rehearsal just a couple of months before and fractured his neck so he didn't have the strength or mobility in his arms He wasn't able to overcome all of that. And so he fell and he was killed.

The truth of what happened may never be known since there seems to be a shroud of secrecy over that day. Jay Cochrane, the sky walker who conquered the heights of the Yangtze River Gorge in a spectacular walk in 1995 and a former member of the Wallenda troupe, would not name specific failings:

> I never really talk about it [Wallenda's fall] much. There are a combination of several things that led to the demise of Karl Wallenda. It's a shame because he was a great wire walker. It was unnecessary, what had happened. The legend has it that the wind blew him off and we'll let legend keep his name aloft (Appendix A 124).

The ancient art of walking the tightrope exists more as a metaphor for risk in the contemporary imagination than as a popular form of entertainment. A recent search on an academic computer server using the keyword "tightrope" turned up no articles on the literal act of walking on a thin strand high above the ground. Instead a plethora of metaphorical titles were served up. Most were like these:

> "Jordan: Walking a Tightrope." *Middle East Journal;* March, 1996.
>
> "Walking the Constitutional Tightrope." *Minnesota Law Review;* April, 1996.
>
> "Letter From Moscow: Yeltsin's Tightrope." *New Yorker;* May, 1993.
>
> "Nursing in Zimbabwe: Walking a Tightrope Without a Net." *Journal of Christian Nursing;* Fall, 1996.

"First Ladies on the Campaign Tightrope." *Smithsonian;* October, 1992.

"Urologists on a Tightrope." *Journal of Urology;* October, 1994.

"Walking the Fluid Cleanliness Tightrope." *Hydraulics and Pneumatics;* March, 1996.

These titles hint at activities that carry with them the potential for disaster if the entity involved should somehow fail to negotiate the dangerous passage between positions of safety. The real act that gives meaning to the metaphor lives as a singularly beautiful and thrilling expression of human will. High wire walking is, in and of itself, a metaphor for human existence. The perilous crossing each individual human being must make between birth and death, a journey fraught with danger, is represented by the wire walker. The loneliness and isolation of the walker who makes his trek beyond the reach of any possible assistance mirrors in the extreme the true situation of the individual who must dwell alone within the confines of the body and mind. And, as will be discussed later, the embellishments, the tricks or stunts that occur along the way, represent those accomplishments each individual achieves in the life journey. At the center of the metaphors, both literal and literary, the concept of risk coils around the core and frames the meaning.

In this thesis I shall examine the notion of physical risk in performance keyed to the act of walking the high wire. I will carve out a distinct meaning of the term, stating what it is and what it is not. While reviewing the sources available to the scholar on risk and wire walking, I will create an historical context for this study. To exemplify risk-in-performance, I shall analyze four performances: Philippe Petit's *Concert in the Sky,* Jay Cochrane's Yangtze

River crossing, the Wallenda Family's famed seven-man pyramid, and, finally, my own efforts at crossing the wire. I will end by producing a general theory of risk-in-performance.

The Notion of Risk

It can come as no more a surprise that wire walkers fall and die than skiers break legs. There is a certain predictability to the idea that activities which appear physically hazardous actually do cause injury or death. We are surprised, however, when stepping off a curb breaks an ankle or walking down the wrong street leads to rape. All activities in life contain risk whether the risk is known or not. Opening an envelope risks a paper cut or the emotional trauma of bad news. Answering the telephone risks a conversation with a bore and the attendant loss of precious minutes of more productive or satisfying activity. Breathing risks lung cancer from accumulated carcinogens. Speeding risks a ticket. The degrees of risk form a spectrum or range of danger. Risk is often seemingly clear, identifiable, and predictable. But part of risk is the unknown, the happenstance, the improbable, the combination of circumstances that can lead even a simple action (or inaction) to disaster. Risk is seen as something to be controlled, managed, and considerable amounts of human brain power has been expended over the ages in creating the intellectual fields of risk analysis and probability theory. Formulas have been created and important decisions affecting the lives and well-being of the world have been made based on the the careful analysis of likely outcomes. The riskiest policy known to humankind poised the world, not on a tightrope, but on the knife edge of

doom, and sported the acronym MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction).

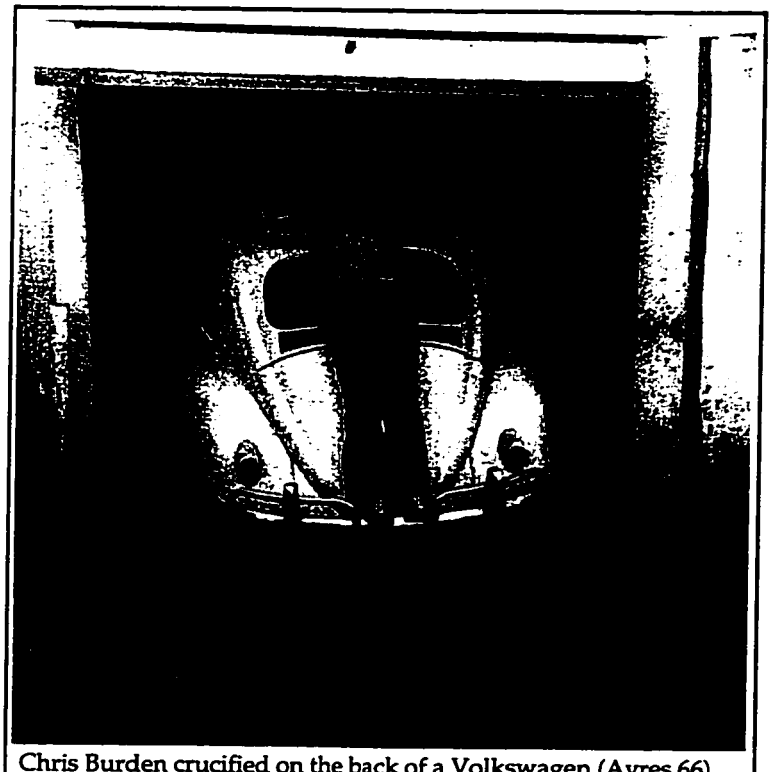
Some risks like breathing or eating constitute a necessary part of living. They must be borne if one is to live. One must breathe even if the air is poisonous. Our bodies will not let us do otherwise. Some actions are so benign that only the most freakish of circumstances could render them deadly or dangerous. Because such circumstances are absurd, they find a niche in comedy. Who can forget the coach who drowns in a bowl of soup in a landmark episode of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*?

At the other end of the risk spectrum are the actions chosen because of (or despite) the very high potential for injury. Warfare, individual combat, mountain climbing, under water welding and high wire walking risks injury or death. Emotional exposure risks humiliation and embarrassment. Insider trading risks financial ruin and imprisonment. Implicit in the notion of risk is the notion of resultant gain. The humblest risk, breathing, results in sustained life. Defeating an enemy gains the victor exhilaration and spoils. Successful market manipulation will yield monetary profit and a luxurious life style. Negotiating a wire strung between the twin towers of the World Trade Center as Philippe Petit did in 1974 will bring passionate joy ("I couldn't help laughing—it was so beautiful. I was dying of happiness.") and world wide fame (Lichtenstein).

Walking the high wire hardly defines the range of risky performances. Risk looms as an element in many areas of human performance, though the activities may vary wildly in degrees of skill, danger, and creativity. Boxers certainly risk injury and sometimes death protected only by rules and thickly padded gloves. Football players are injured weekly and sometimes crippled

for life despite the armor they wear. Ariana, the Human Arrow, a featured attraction with the Ringling Brothers Circus, courts risk when she is shot across the arena, though how much skill is involved in being a projectile is open to question. When Evel Knievel jumped his motorcycle across masses of cars or busses, he ran the risk of injury and failed enough times to have broken every bone in his body, or so he claims.

Performance artists like Chris Burden, who has had himself shot, set on fire, crucified to the back of a Volkswagen, and wired naked to electrical



Chris Burden crucified on the back of a Volkswagen (Ayres 66).

straps with a bucket of water close by, the upset of which would have sent him frying to kingdom come, do take dangerous risks. The skill involved, however, comes from imagining the set up rather than bodily virtuosity won through years of hard practice and god-given coordination. The Australian

Stelarc suspended by hooks (*Australia*... 76).

artist Stelarc endures the piercing of his body by hooks from which he then hangs in various poses. Uncomfortable? Painful? Yes. Life threatening? Perhaps. In his event "Street Suspension," Stelarc (born Stelios Arcadiou) hung his hooked, naked body on a traverse pulley that moved him out a window and high above East 11th Street in New York City (Carr 10-15). The event qualifies as an interesting spectacle requiring imagination, resistance to pain, and lack of modesty.

On stage or in film, actors seldom take serious physical risks; stars are too valuable a commodity. There are notable exceptions, of course. A great part of Jackie Chan's appeal comes from his well known stunts, all of which he does himself. This daring, and, more importantly, his audience's knowledge of the fact, greatly enhance the value of his performance. Emotional exposure certainly qualifies as another important category of daring for actors. If an actor can reveal depths of emotion at a level beyond the spectators' experience, the results astonish. When he or she does, as Harvey Keitel shows in his powerful, gut wrenching performance in *The Bad Lieutenant* or similarly Theresa Russell in *Whore*, the effect is electrifying.

In an odd offshoot of performance art, Annie Sprinkle, former porn star, developed an act of self exposure the risk of which lies in its appalling vulnerability. Cynthia Carr reports:

> A female assistant (dressed as a man) helped Sprinkle with the speculum. There Annie sat, legs spread, inviting the

audience to peek inside her with the aid of a flashlight. I recalled the old days of the women's movement, when looking at another woman's cervix—or one's own—was a political act (but never done as a performance, so far as I know).

Performance artist Annie Sprinkle (Sprinkle).

> Every other gawker who crushed onto the stage was male, and each contributed a dumb wisecrack after peering through the speculum on hands and knees.
>
> But to look inside someone's body is to see too much. Sprinkle had gone beyond nakedness to a supernakedness that transcends sexuality: body interiors aren't sexy. All that remained were questions of vulnerability and power (174-176).

Police arrest, an ancillary danger in this kind of performance, emerges as a not uncommon hazard for those who dare to flout norms by risking themselves in ways and places not sanctioned by a society increasingly given over to the minimization of liability and responsibility.

A performer who breaks out of a certain mold or category can be said to take a risk. Because of a long and passionate kiss with Kevin Kline, movie star Tom Selleck in the film comedy *In and Out* (1997) risked his popular,

highly successful image as a masculine action hero/dream boat. Will audiences accept this? Will they continue to pay money to see this actor who defies conventional notions of male propriety? Seems so since the film had the second best opening weekend gross for a September release. Risk rewarded.

The rewards of risk taking like Selleck's are obvious. The career enhancement due to a star who helps a film break box office records will mean a higher salary next time and perhaps more interesting job offers. But what are the rewards for a performer who takes physical risk? In extreme cases, like a Jackie Chan or an Evel Knievel, risk can certainly lead to fame and fortune. But beyond gains in money and renown, the performer who risks his life gets an emotional reward for cheating death. There is an exhilaration, a "high," attendant in performance of a death defying feat that brings exquisite joy, a rapture. For Philippe Petit, such rapture became a danger when he walked the cable between the twin towers of the World Trade Center. To writer Ralph Keyes, he revealed that he needed "to discipline my mind from the tremendous waves of happiness." Keyes also reports that "most of the walk was done in such a blissful trance that only afterward did he realize how long he had been up there (40 minutes)" (Keyes 16).

Where did Petit's ecstasy come from? As will be explained further on in this thesis, it derived from three elements of the experience. First, the crossing was incredibly bold and imaginative, inconceivable to the common run of humanity. No one had ever achieved a more audacious crossing. Secondly, the aesthetics of the risk, mind boggling height and an

incomparable venue gave Petit his glorious moment in the sun and a lasting fame. Finally, awareness of the audience perception, both the immediate crowd gathered below and the inevitable media coverage world wide amplified his rush of pleasure. For professional risk takers, life and the many positive rewards of success far outweigh the fear of failure and death.

Audiences, too, take a risk when they attend performances. Audience members have been killed when race cars crash over barriers and into the crowd. Audiences can suffer emotional trauma when witnessing harrowing scenes. Animal tamers have been mauled to death in front of thousands of children. There can be no doubt that such a spectacle will carry a lasting impression.

The Age of AIDS has presented new risks to audiences. In 1993, HIV positive performer Ron Athey presented a spectacle in New York entitled *St. Sebastian Is Enlightened in a Zen Garden* which ended with Athey pierced and bleeding in close proximity to his audience.

> Finally, Athey is tied to a pole, standing on a plastic sheet. A woman pushes darts into his body, slowly, agonizingly. The program tells us to remember St. Sebastian, but we forget St. Sebastian, we see only Athey's skin being pierced, his blood running down his body and onto the plastic. The panic of his blood, the breaking of his skin's barrier, destroys the theatre of the moment, allows no metaphors of mysticism or s/m to insert meaning into the spectacle (McGrath 26).

The audience is threatened with death. Tainted blood splattered into the audience could conceivably find an opening in the skin and infect. Risky behavior leads to risky performance with fear and the perception of danger

for the audience. It is "truly a bloody stage where blood is a potential cause of the death of the spectator, not just a reference to the death of a character" (McGrath 29).

Such performances are out of the scope of the present work, however. By focusing on the act of walking the high wire, I hope to show how these performers, executing dangerous acts in which the consequence of failure is death, manage risk. So then, it is the risk of bodily injury or death in a performance framed by danger, to paraphrase Philippe Petit, and not emotional risk, financial risk, psychological risk, legal risk, or audience risk that forms the concern of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

The Literature of Risk and High Wire

"The literature of the high wire is sparse."—Philippe Petit

The Risk Shelf

Scholarly interest in the notion of risk falls generally into three categories: financial risk, risk to humanity through human activities or acts of nature, and the psychological and sociological aspects of risk taking. The relevance of such works to the area of performance risk is not always apparent at first glance. However, relevance does exist and useful ideas and models gleaned from these studies can be modified and applied to the developing theory of physical risk-in-performance.

By far the greatest number of titles available, and perhaps this is a reflection of our capitalist society, concerns financial risk and the rewards to be gained thereby. In these works, risk is regarded as a necessary, truly, inevitable component in the quest for profit. Mary Douglas avers in her book *Risk and Blame* that the concept of risk "has its origins in gambling theory and the mathematics of probability" (14). In such context no gain can be had without the possibility of loss. She goes on to say that "risk...meant the probability of an event occurring, combined with the magnitude of the losses or gains that would be entailed" (Douglas 23). Since business ventures are closely akin to gambling, especially undertakings such as insurance where the amount of money taken in is calculated against the probability of a given event occurring, risk is central to the whole idea and it is a maxim that the greater the risk, the greater the reward. Daniel Kehrer, in his book *Doing*

Business Boldly: The Art of Taking Intelligent Risks, quotes Walter Wriston as saying, "Profits come from risk" (4). Venture capitalists, for example risk a great deal of money on unproven ideas and products. The failure rate of these projects is high but when they succeed the payoff is enormous. A person sage enough or courageous enough to have invested in Apple Computers as Jobs and Wozniak left their Cupertino garage would have become a millionaire. Conversely, disaster awaits those who miscalculate—New Coke, anyone? To those in business and finance, risk is something to be managed for maximum return at minimum exposure. Risk in this milieu, then, cannot be entirely negative.

Many of the books examined in the areas of financial and industrial risk turned out to be useless in the quest for background. M. W. Jones-Lee's promising sounding title *The Economics of Safety and Physical Risk* proves to be a book of mathematical formulas for probabilities, and a highly technical tome, *Risk Analysis in the Private Sector,* relates to fields such as chemicals, nuclear power, carcinogenic agents. However, some writers on the subject do have contributions to make toward a theory of performance risk, not in the specifics, perhaps, but certainly in the general views of the problem in the areas of definition of risk, reasons for risk, and control of risk. Some thought-provoking but marginally useful models for threat identification and categorization appear in John M. Carroll's *Managing Risk: A Computer-Aided Strategy* although the book is so entirely geared towards business that its relevance to performance is extremely limited. In *Practical Risk Analysis,* David Hertz and Howard Thomas define risk as "both uncertainty and the results of uncertainty. That is, risk refers to a lack of predicability about a

problem structure" (Hertz 3). They also use formulas as well as graphs and charts to streamline the decision making process and minimize the inevitable gamble involved in business risk.

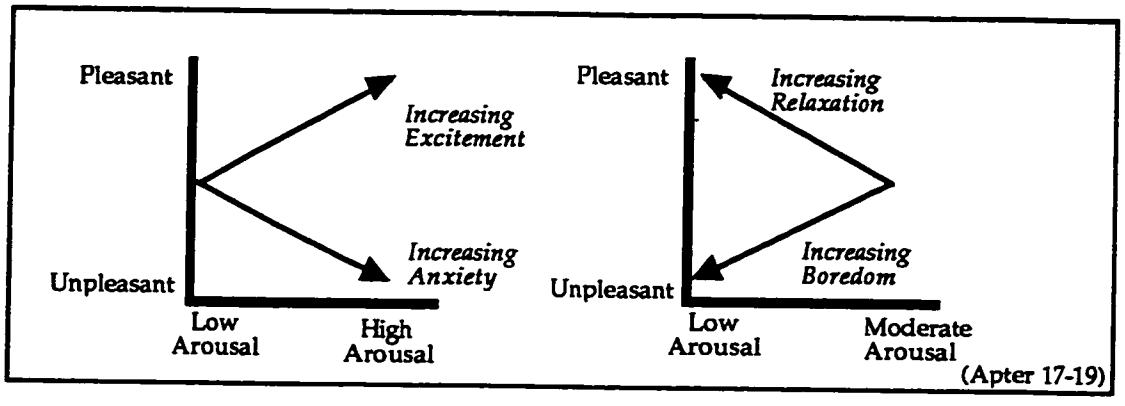
More important ideas for my purposes can be found in the aforementioned *Doing Business Boldly* by Daniel Kehrer. This author extracts from economist Joseph Schumpeter the notion of "creative destruction" meaning the destruction of "the status quo in search of something better" (4). This notion has obvious application for performers seeking ever more daring acts to please both themselves and their audiences.

Risks that humanity runs through innovations such as nuclear weapons and power, technological advances such as microwaves and new materials, human attempts at environmental control through dam building, or risks to humanity through alterations to the life sustaining environment caused by construction, industry, transportation, or war also form a sizable portion of the risk shelf. In these areas, risk has shifted its meaning. "Whereas originally a high risk meant a game in which a throw of the die had a strong probability of bringing great pain or great loss, now *risk* refers only to negative outcomes. The word has been pre-empted to mean bad risks" (Douglas 24). To those who would manage risk in areas of human activity such as construction and product manufacture, risk is something to be brought as close to zero probability as possible. Risk is entirely negative. An elevator, for example must be built to tolerances that permit only the remotest possibility of failure. A building constructed in an earthquake zone must take into consideration measures and techniques to allow the structure to withstand significant temblors. The production and distribution of food

must have safeguards against the possibilities of contamination.

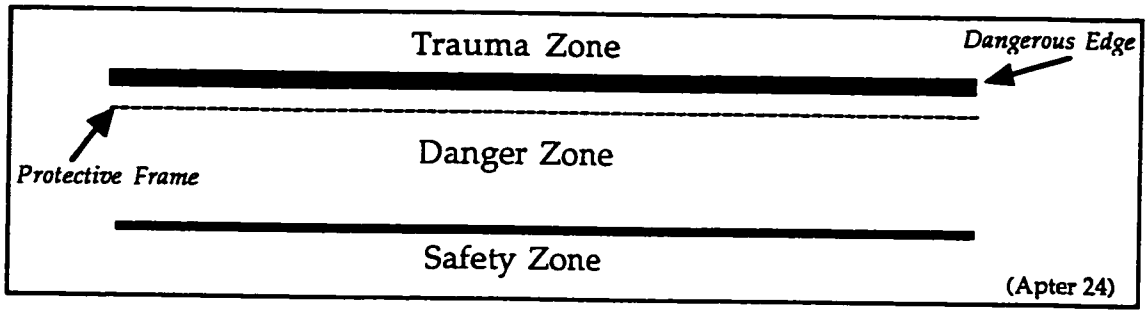
A certain level of risk can be tolerated to enjoy the benefit of technological advances. There is no question that fire is dangerous; so is electricity. Yet without the former humanity would still be shivering in caves and without the latter civilization would have reached its zenith with the steam age. As pointed out in Chapter 1, no human action is without risk, so a whole field of study has grown up around the idea of managing and reducing risk and making modern life safe while using products and engaging in activities that are dangerous or hold the potential for danger. The elaborate, costly, and time consuming efforts of the Food and Drug Administration to ensure the efficacy and safety of drugs and food additives are done solely to reduce risk to the general population. Yet despite these efforts disasters such as the thalidomide episode of the early sixties still occur.

Ideas and models relevant to performance are clearest in the work of psychologists and sociologists. Frank Yates in *Risk Taking Behavior* provides insight into the reasons for disagreement as to what constitutes risk and provides some interesting ideas and models for risk identification and management. He quotes extensively from the work of Slovic, Fischoff, and Lichtenstein who have created a scale of risk and risk factors. Michael J. Apter probes risk taking as a phenomenon of the complexity of human personality and motivation. He speaks of the physiological and emotional states leading to high arousal as lines of anxiety or excitement, one pleasant, one unpleasant, one positive one negative. In the opposite direction, the lines toward inactivity lead to pleasant or unpleasant consequences of relaxation or boredom.



Apter uses the idea of zones to categorize human behavior as follows:

> ...every activity in life [has] three zones: safety, danger, and trauma. In terms of the literal example of an edge just given, when you are *away from* the cliff edge you are in the *safety* zone, when you are *on* the cliff edge you are in the *danger* zone, and if you *slip or fall* (or are pushed) *over* the edge you are, to put it in an odd-seeming way, in the zone of *trauma* (Apter 24-25).



Illustrating his ideas in the chart above, Apter has inadvertently provided a sort of diagram of the high wire act with the thin dotted line representing the wire, the thick line the disaster of falling, and the thin line the safety of the spectator.

Apter edges toward the concerns of performance risk and provides some notions and models that compliment and coincide with ideas that will

be discussed in this thesis. For example, just as Philippe Petit uses the word "frame" to indicate the risk that surrounds his performances, Apter uses the same word to indicate measures that contain a performer's or spectator's exposure to that danger (Appendix B 154).

> This protective frame may come from one's own confidence, the availability of others to help one, the presence of physical aids, and the like. The effect of it is that a person can get very close to trauma without actually being traumatized (Apter 26).

Apter further categorizes his "protective frame" in ways that can be applied to performance. The "confidence frame" is that set of circumstances that provide the performer with the confidence that he can indeed take and weather the risks involved. One must believe that one can cross the wire or one will surely fall. That belief comes from preparation, rehearsal, and experience. In the "safety zone frame," the performer believes that because of precautions, there is no chance of truly slipping into danger. For a wire walker such precautions could include a safety net or safety line. The "detachment frame" can be applied primarily to audiences who believe someone else is in danger or that the danger is remote enough to be inconsequential to an observer (Apter 70-72).

Sociologist Mary Douglas, quoted several times above, approaches risk from a unique perspective. She has specialized in the concept of risk out of a background as an anthropologist working in Religious studies. Douglas provides a useful overview of the field through definition and cogent questions. She brings the charged term *risk* back to ground by observing, "Danger would once have been the right word, but plain danger does not

have the aura of science or afford the pretense of a possible precise calculation" (Douglas 25). She also poses the prime question, "How safe is safe enough?" as well as pointing out the perhaps obvious, "Risk depends on time-span"(Douglas 41, 18).

Less useful in the narrow field of performance risk, Ellen Siegelman's *Personal Risk: Mastering Love and Change* deals with the less physical risks of life change. There are indeed risks when one changes jobs, gets a divorce, moves to a new location, or adopts a child. These risks, however, usually do not endanger one in a way that produces immediate physical trauma.

Although none of the works mentioned above deal specifically with theatrical performance, they do sometimes shed light on the dark areas of performance risk, performance analysis, and high wire walking. In an analogy readily applicable to high wire walking, Michael Apter uses a tiger and a cage to illustrate the differences between fear, excitement, and boredom. "Both the tiger and the cage are needed in order for one to experience excitement: The tiger without the cage would be frightening; the cage without the tiger would be boring" (Apter 27).

The High Wire Shelf

Little attention has been paid to the specialty of tightrope walking by the relatively few scholars who study performance. A survey of performance literature produces nothing written in any scholarly way and precious little written in histories of entertainment or the circus, wire walking's primary venue. Two biographies chronicle the exploits of the Wallendas (about whom more later); journalists detail some particular crossings; and a

comprehensive listing of circus-centered sources compiled by R. Toole Stott, *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography,* proves more tantalizing than substantial because many of the texts listed are well over a century old and difficult to obtain. One such book published in 1862, *Blondin: His Life and Performances,* surfaced in the the U.C., Berkeley library and is an invaluable background source on that peerless practitioner. (The volume was in mint condition, an indication that it is seldom, if ever checked out.) The same book alludes to references in Suetonius and Juvenal about rope dancers in antiquity and mentions other apparently well-known wire walkers or rope dancers (the categories of these performers will be clarified below) without attributing sources.

Attempts at securing other texts cited in Stott's bibliography have been futile with one exception. A microfilm of a turn-of-the-century pamphlet forwarded by the Library of Congress, "How to Become a Wire Walker" by a performer named Zotique Proulx with the *nom de joue* "Slackey," has proven more humorous than valuable. A poorly disguised attempt to separate the gullible from their cash, the booklet gives feeble "instructions" in the most general of ways:

> Now we will say you are facing north; your right hand towards the east and your left hand toward the west. What you have to do is try and bring the wire on which you stand with the left foot, in the same direction your body may go. This is done by spreading the legs to and apart from one another. I hope you understand what I mean. Practice on that one foot until you have accomplished it (Proulx 6-7).

Other lessons are even more vague and generally end with a product pitch.

In Lesson 6 (here quoted in its entirety), "Slackey" lures the would-be performer:

> The last feat for you to learn is without a doubt the greatest feat now being performed, was [sic] originated by me; that is to walk upon a slack wire with stilts. As I am the only one who knows how to make these stilts, and as it is impossible for any one else to make them, I will send you full instructions how to do this great feat when you purchase a pair of stilts from me. See price list (Proulx 10-11).

This source, published in 1897, has little use beyond amusement. It does, however, hint at a vigorous market for such entertainment. The 25 cent pamphlet includes newspaper citations attesting to "Prof. Slackey's" skill. For example, the pamphlet quotes The *Des Moines Daily News* of July 12, 1893 as claiming that 20,000 people witnessed a Slackey performance (Proulx 24). Since the source is Slackey himself, such information must be held with at least some suspicion until independently verified.

Of Jean-François Gravelet, known to the world as Charles Blondin, the Hero of Niagara, there is no scholarly work apparent. The only modern writings to deal with him are children's books. Contemporary books on Blondin and his exploits, with the sole exception mentioned above, are unavailable. And yet, Blondin was a performer who electrified audiences for more than forty years on two continents, who drew distinguished audiences of the rich and powerful as well as the *hoi polloi* from hundreds of miles to witness his daring. His skill earned the

Blondin (Banks ii).

patronage of the Prince of Wales as well as the acquaintance of Prime Ministers D'Israeli and Gladstone (Banks 40-41,124).

No analysis of actual high wire crossings with their many embellishments exist, in terms of the various codes (performer, performance, historical and others) that might apply, not surprising given the scholarly neglect already mentioned. But another challenge hampers the researcher. In most performance genres, film, video, or audio records exist in abundance. Even live theatrical events, notorious for their paucity of recordings, have a substantial body of filmic records due to programs like PBS's *Great Performances* and pirate tapings. Audio recordings of plays and musicals, excerpted or whole, have long been available. These give scholars ample means to analyze performers and their product. Film records of tightrope walkers, however, are rare, often privately held, and the few that are known, for example, Philippe Petit's appearances in *Concert in the Sky*, and *High Wire*, are hard to find.

The videos used in this thesis for performance analysis proved obtainable with a little dogged effort. I was able to locate *Concert in the Sky* by tracking down the producers and buying a video tape from them. Tapes of Jay Cochrane were secured through Mr. Cochrane's agent, Mike Wilson who was located with the help of the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco. Once I was aware that a theatrical film called *The Great Wallendas* existed, a copy was purchased through an internet video vendor. This film, while not an historical record of the Wallendas, is as accurate a recreation as can be hoped for of the famous seven-man pyramid that ended so disastrously in Detroit in the early sixties. Since Karl Wallenda himself was the technical advisor on

the film, one can accept the recreated act as technically faithful to the original, and so the historical event will be analyzed using this theatrical facsimile. My own experiences with the high wire and the analysis that ensues will be documented with video tape and photographs.

A poetic book called "On the High Wire" by Philippe Petit, without doubt the most famous funambulist currently practicing, provides an entrée into the world of the high wire walker, with allusions to techniques, equipment, mind sets, history, and discipline that pique the reader's interest, yet the slim volume lacks the depth and detail that might truly satisfy. The greatest value of this book lies in its revelation of the thinking of one practitioner able to express himself cogently on the subject. This is no small contribution. Petit, in an interview, explains the lack of information: "The literature of the high wire is sparse...There is almost nothing, because if one is not a part of that universe how can one write well about it?" (Daniels 52). Petit further speculates, with more than a hint of scorn, on why wire walkers don't write:

> Probably because most high wire walkers come from the circus branch and are illiterate—that is the condition of life in the circus and probably why we do not have more reports from practitioners (Daniels 52).

Petit, reserving true knowledge of the skill of high wire walker for those called to it, warns off casual readers and scholars alike early in his book "On the High Wire:"

> ...the high wire is not what you think it is. It is not a realm of lightness, space, and smiles. It is a job. Grim, tough, deceptive. And whoever does not want to struggle against

> failure, against danger, whoever is not prepared to give everything to feel that he is alive, does not need to be a high wire walker. Nor could he ever become one. As for this book—the study of the high wire is not rigorous, it is useless (Petit 9).

A New Perception

In the quote above, Philippe Petit seems to say that the art of the high wire is unknowable to anyone who does not practice the skill and scholarly research will never reveal much of any importance. Whatever perception one may have as a spectator, an outsider, whatever construction or reading one makes of the high wire act, the truth is something else. The arduous road to performance, the danger, the falls, the bruises, the frustrations, the rigging technology that underpins the act are truths known only the practitioner. In this Petit is correct; so correct, in fact, that one could plug the name of any endeavor of humankind in place of the words "high wire" and the statement would still be true. An audience attending a play, ballet, or opera usually know nothing of the efforts that lead to the performance nor should they. They cannot know the actor's difficulty in memorizing 700 lines of blank verse, the singer's soaring exhilaration in hitting the high C, the years of sacrifice and training the dancer endures to present an audience with the perception of grace and effortlessness. These are the mysteries of craft and every craft has mysteries known only to the initiate. Petit has said nothing new or particularly important here. It has always been true that certain knowledge can only be gained through first hand experience.

But Petit is wrong when he says that "study of the high wire...is

useless." A study of the high wire, in fact, reveals truths about performance and more specifically risk-in-performance that are not or have not been brought to light elsewhere, truths that readily apply to other areas of performance. But why should high wire of all modes of performance be the particular focus of such a study? It is because the starkness of the risk is so evident. You fall, you die. The appealing clarity of the walker risking his life on the high wire is such a compelling universal image that, as stated earlier, it simultaneously exists as both a literal and figurative metaphor for the human condition. In no other performance can the consequences of risk be seen so clearly. Death as the outcome of failure cannot be mitigated by gray uncertainty.

This research will show that risk-in-performance is truly a separate category of risk deserving of its own analysis. There are several reasons for this. First, in performance as in high flying capitalism, risk is a positive, necessary attribute, not a negative one that must be minimized. Secondly, new challenges, new risks, must be sought out continually and accepted. The performer must strive to do what has not been done or what has not been done in living memory. So a high wire walker like Petit makes plans to be the first to cross the Grand Canyon or to better Blondin's Niagara Falls crossing. Or he tries to incorporate the high wire into theatrical settings, integrate it with narrative and music, or, in his role as artist-in-residence at New York's Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, perform inside a church. The different objectives of Jay Cochrane lure him to set records for height and length of crossing.

The positive side of risk taking by itself would not be sufficient to

distinguish risk-in-performance from other categories of risk. However, when the risk, in and of itself, becomes the object of art with its own particular aesthetics, then a different set of perceptions begin to operate that separate this kind of risk from disaster management, financial strategy, or psycho-sociological studies of motivations. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the way in which risk is presented to an audience shapes that audience's response. For example, if the audience can clearly see that a fall from the wire will clearly mean death, as in Philippe Petit's World Trade Center crossing, the emotional investment will be proportionately higher than if the audience in a circus tent can see a safety line or net protecting the walker from serious harm. This controllable, manipulatable aspect of danger serves an aesthetic purpose and is as much a part of the artist's performance as music, sets, or costumes.

The study of risk-in-performance also leads to such underexamined areas as the relation between performer and risk, performer and audience, and audience and risk. How is risk managed by the performer to serve his ends rather than threaten them? What methods are used? Despite Petit's warning that such study is useless, a close examination does reveal techniques that are definable and categorical. How does risk affect the emotions of the walker? What feelings does it generate? How do these emotions in turn contribute to the performance? How do these emotions affect the empathetic link to the audience? And finally, what is the direct relationship between risk and audience? Does the audience risk anything itself? What is the nature of the risk? What are the dangers and rewards for an audience? Surely these questions suffice to justify this study.

The detailed analysis of performance is the method of discovery to be used in this thesis to illuminate and clarify these questions and lead to conclusions about physical risk-in-performance. By analyzing the performances of high wire walkers Petit, Cochrane, and Wallenda, insight can be gained into the nature of this kind of risk and more importantly how it is used as an element of the art. The analysis of my own attempts at wire walking will reveal in a small way some of the mysteries of the craft and, because of my own long experience as an actor, how this experience can translate into other areas of performance.

CHAPTER 3

The Art of High Wire Walking

Circus Star Bird Millman circa 1920 (Durant 189).

The risk of the high wire is of a different order. At thirty feet above the ground, a fall means serious injury or death. At a hundred feet, death is probable. At heights greater, death is certain. Yet this skill does not depend on youth or great strength. A professional athlete's career ends early with few competing past a fortieth birthday. A dancer's mobility diminishes leaving a reduced arsenal of movement. Performance artists eventually abandon the kind of self-abuse practiced by Chris Burden or Stelarc. Stunt men like Evel Knievel retire to a painful, crippled twilight. But wire walkers keep going, crossing the wire well into old age. Madame Saqui, a favorite of Napoleon, was performing into her seventies (Disher 152-153). "Professor" Ivy Baldwin celebrated his 82nd birthday in 1948 by crossing a 320 foot wire stretched across Colorado's Boulder Creek Canyon at a height of 125 feet. He liked it so much, he walked it again the next day (*Time*). Karl Wallenda died from a high wire

fall at the age of seventy-three. Philippe Petit hopes "...to give the greatest gift a high wire walker can give: to die on my wire, leaving to men the insult of a smiling death mask" (Petit 110).

High wire walking differs from other risky human performances because the act is a living embodiment of the human condition; it is both action and metaphor. In treading between heaven and earth with only the slimmest of support to sustain him, the wire walker is not content to just walk. In his passage he must also perform a variety of "tricks," or as I denote them, embellishments, that are meant to astonish or terrify the audience with their danger. These embellishments can be as seemingly simple an action as standing sideways or as astounding as crossing the wire with a ballerina balanced on point on the walker's forehead (Banks 79, Petit 47). This living metaphor represents the hazard of human existence: the walker is every man; the wire symbolizes the precarious safety of one's journey through life with early death for one who slips through misjudgment or carelessness; like Dumbo's feather, the balance pole represents the hope of safety; and the embellishments are the creations a human being makes during his passage. Empathetic involvement makes this metaphor relevant to every spectator.

Philippe Petit identifies three categories of rope performing: rope dancer, low wire artist, and high wire walker.

> Whoever walks, dances, or performs
> on a rope raised several yards from the ground
> is not a high wire walker.
> His wire can be tight or slack; it can bounce
> or be completely loose. He works with or without a

balancing pole.
He is called the rope dancer.

Whoever uses a thin wire of brass or steel
in the same way
becomes the low wire artist.

There remains the one whose performance is a game of chance.
The one who is proud of his fear.
He dares to stretch his cable over precipices,
he attacks bell towers,
he separates mountains and brings them together. His steel cable, his rope, must be extremely tight.
He uses a balancing pole for great crossings.
He is the *Voleur* of the Middle Ages,
the *Ascensioniste* of Blondin's time,
the *Funambule.*

In English we call him the High Wire Walker (Petit 7).

A sub category of the high wire, the ascension (which Petit calls the Death Walk), demands the performer walk up or down a wire inclined at thirty degrees or more, a difficult feat most often performed without a pole and sometimes blindfolded. In her book *Circus: from Rome to Ringling,* Marian Murray describes two performers famous for their rapid descents on the inclined rope:

> In his famous engraving of the Southwark Fair, Hogarth showed Cadman, the Wingless Bird-Man, performing in

> the background above the heads of the crowd. He could go down a 150-foot rope in six or seven seconds, so fast he left a trail of smoke. He was killed while performing in Shrewsbury in 1740, and his gravestone recorded that the rope was drawn too tight. Violante, who appears in the foreground of the engraving, once went headfirst down a slack rope from the arches of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields to the Royal Mews (62).

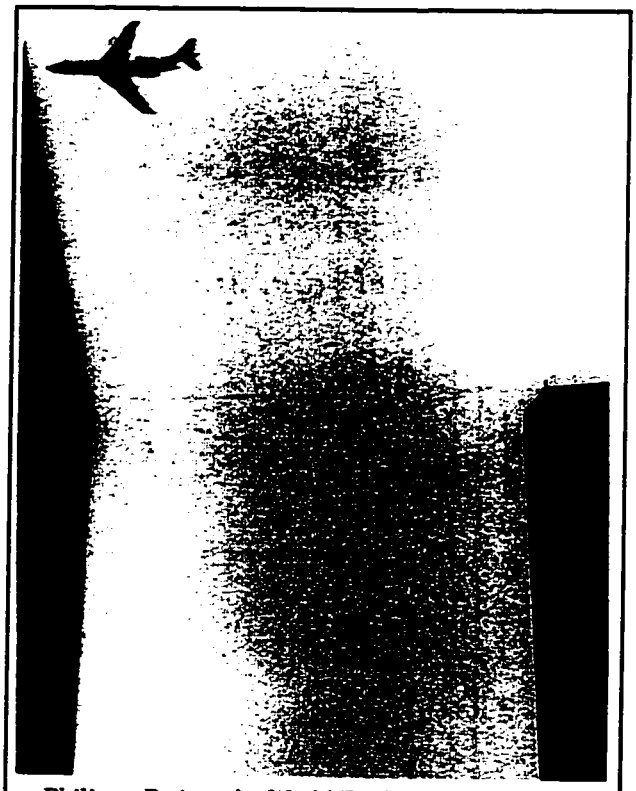
Low wire and slack wire aside for now and focusing only on the high wire, funambulists perform in three distinct types of crossing milieus: the artificial, the natural, and the architectural. In the artificial crossing, the funambulist erects a pair of "king poles" sometimes as tall as thirty-six feet and, with exacting rigging methods, stretches the wire taut between them. This type of crossing appears most commonly in the circus (or circus type) environment.

The natural crossing takes advantage of such naturally occurring heights as river gorges, small valleys, canyons, or wherever a wire can be stretched between two points. Distance becomes a factor in such crossing, which means greater endurance for the the artist, exposure to elements such as wind and weather, and the inevitable sag of the line. No matter how much stress is placed on the wire, a long distance will cause the wire to bow downward from its own weight. In the most famous crossings in history, Blondin's extraordinary mastering of Niagara Falls in the summer of 1859, the 1100-foot distance caused a sag of 60 feet (Banks, 36-41; Murray 179). This means that the walker must not only cross, he must go "downhill" and "uphill" to do it. A walk of this type occurred in China on October 28, 1995 when Jay Cochrane crossed the Yangtze River Gorge (Wilson). The 54 year-

old Canadian wire-walker traversed 2,100 feet from the Tiger Face on the north side of the gorge to the Lion Face on the south side at a height of 1365 feet above the Yangtze River. Midway on his 53-minute crossing, he gave a wire-walker's salute by standing on one leg and waving to the crowd (Winchester). Chapter 5 following provides a detailed analysis of this walk.

In the architectural crossing, the high wire walker moves between two man-made points, often between two buildings, a bridge or other man-made structures. Philippe Petit made a specialty of this type of event with crossings on the bridge in Sydney Harbor, between the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral, inside the Louisiana Superdome, and most famous of all, between the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

As a subset of this category, Petit calls some of his crossings "clandestine," meaning the crossings were unannounced and trespass was necessary to achieve the event. His World Trade Center crossing in 1974 took months of preparation and the cooperation of several confederates to accomplish. According to the *New York Times*, Petit used a five-foot cross bow to shoot a hempen line from the North Tower to helpers waiting 131 feet away on the South Tower. The rope was then used to draw a steel cable across the span. After the cable was secured and stretched taut between the identical towers of steel and glass, the young Frenchman gripped his 28 foot balance pole weighing 45 pounds and stepped out over the abyss. Months of stealthy preparation culminated in this moment as Petit, confident of his skill, moved to the center of the wire and knelt in a traditional funambulist salute, the first



Philippe Petit at the World Trade Center, 1974 (Petit 115).

exercise a high wire walker must learn (Petit 26). 1350 feet below, the morning rush hour in lower Manhattan ground to a halt as workers by the hundreds turned spectators, snarling traffic as they gaped at the distance-shrunk figure. The police responded and deployed, present yet impotent, unable to interrupt the unfolding performance. Philippe Petit, a veteran wire walker at the age of 24, spent 45 minutes crossing and recrossing between the redundant, 110 story buildings before finally ending his feat and surrendering to the waiting lawmen. When questioned afterward why he would do such a thing, Petit replied, "If I see three oranges, I have to juggle. And if I see two towers, I have to walk" (Lichtenstein 20). As for the fear such a risk might engender, the funambulist airily responded, "I was not scared because it was a

precise thing. I couldn't help laughing—it was so beautiful. I was dying of happiness" (Lichtenstein 20) A reporter asked if he has any dreams. The spirit of Blondin, that most famous of all *ascenionistes,* seemed to hover close as young Petit answered, "Niagara Falls. I would like to cross the falls but, who knows? For that I need permission" (Lichtenstein 20).

Since high wire walking is transparently a life-threatening affair, prudence dictates that some measures be taken to minimize danger. Just as the average person daily confronts and avoids danger while taking part in inherently perilous activities such as driving and using electricity by practicing safety, so, too, the high wire walker reduces his risk to a manageable variable. In the lessening of risk, two strategies exist, one which preserves the consequences of failure and one which seeks to eliminate them. The former, according to Petit, are used by those who may call themselves high wire walkers, aerialists, ascensionists, or funambules, while those who try to eliminate danger are scorned as "fakes," "equilibrists," or "stunt men" (Petit 7, 75-76).

The high wire walker always supervises the rigging of his wire personally, checking each detail, making sure of its rightness. Once the wire is taut, the artist stretches guy wires called *cavalettis* by Petit, guy wires by Cochrane, down from each side of the main wire at a 45 degree angle and perpendicular to the route of travel. These are placed about fifteen meters apart (or closer) and are meant to reduce the sway of the wire due to wind and weight. Too many cavalettis too close together are a mark of "amateurism and cowardice" (Petit 59-62). Once the wire is run, as in any performance, rehearsal and concentration become the key to safety.

The true wire walker strives to reduce the risk he takes to a minimum through the legitimate means of attending to the details of equipment and rigging and by rehearsing endlessly. In this way, the wire walker shrugs off his own apprehensions and fears and transfers the perception of risk and its attendant emotions to the readers of the performance—the audience. Petit goes so far as to deny the danger he faces absolutely. "People think I take risks, but I never take risks. The cable is framed by death, but it isn't a dangerous world because by the time I walk, the unknown has been reduced to zero" (Williams 16). It is the audience, then, that absorbs the feelings of apprehension and fear.

Audience involvement, a devilishly tricky element to measure, increases with the perceived level of performer risk. Judging by my own reactions and those of audiences of which I have been a part, the empathetic bond engages most strongly when risk of a high degree is involved. This is clearly the case in dangerous sporting events such as boxing, football, or car racing. In a live boxing match (or even a filmed one such as "Rocky"), the audience cannot help reacting with muscle twitches and utterances as if they, themselves, were giving and receiving blows.

Critics often use hackneyed terms to describe this effect—"riveting" "compelling," "mesmerizing" are some that leap to mind. These writers mean that the acts witnessed command the attention of an audience so strongly that they cannot look away. No activities (save perhaps the single exception of the sex act) compel attention in a more visceral way than those that include the strong possibility of death, injury, or destruction. Events that occur before one's very eyes are the most powerful of all since a spectator

knows that what is seen is real and the risk has not been diminished by special effects magic or the use of a stunt double. I would further posit that such visceral, empathetic connections between those in danger and those who watch is genetically hard wired into human beings and is part of an instinctual, society building urge.

Efforts to reduce the danger of high wire walking by measures other than skill are numerous. Petit devotes a chapter of his book to the notion of cheating on the high wire. He compounds all the cowardly transgressions of "fakes" into one particular performer:

> I know a man who sells himself body and soul to the highest bidder. He uses a blindfold with holes in it, an immense balancing pole that hangs over both sides of his overly guy-lined wire, and presents his exercises above a net. He has learned to walk on the cable with an "extension cord"— a second wire that runs parallel to the one he walks on. It is just above his head, and he can grab onto it whenever he wants. Over the circus rings where he works as a so-called high wire walker, he uses a "mechanic." This is an almost invisible cable attached to a safety belt that has been sown into his costume. His assistant, who stays on the ground during his performance, manipulates the string with tiny, discrete movements, as though he were controlling a puppet. As a result, the equilibrist is able to do stunts that no wire walker could ever attempt, much less accomplish (75).

Petit goes on to scorn this walker's use of resin to assure good grip on the wire: "...his feet were not placed on the wire, they were glued to it" (75).

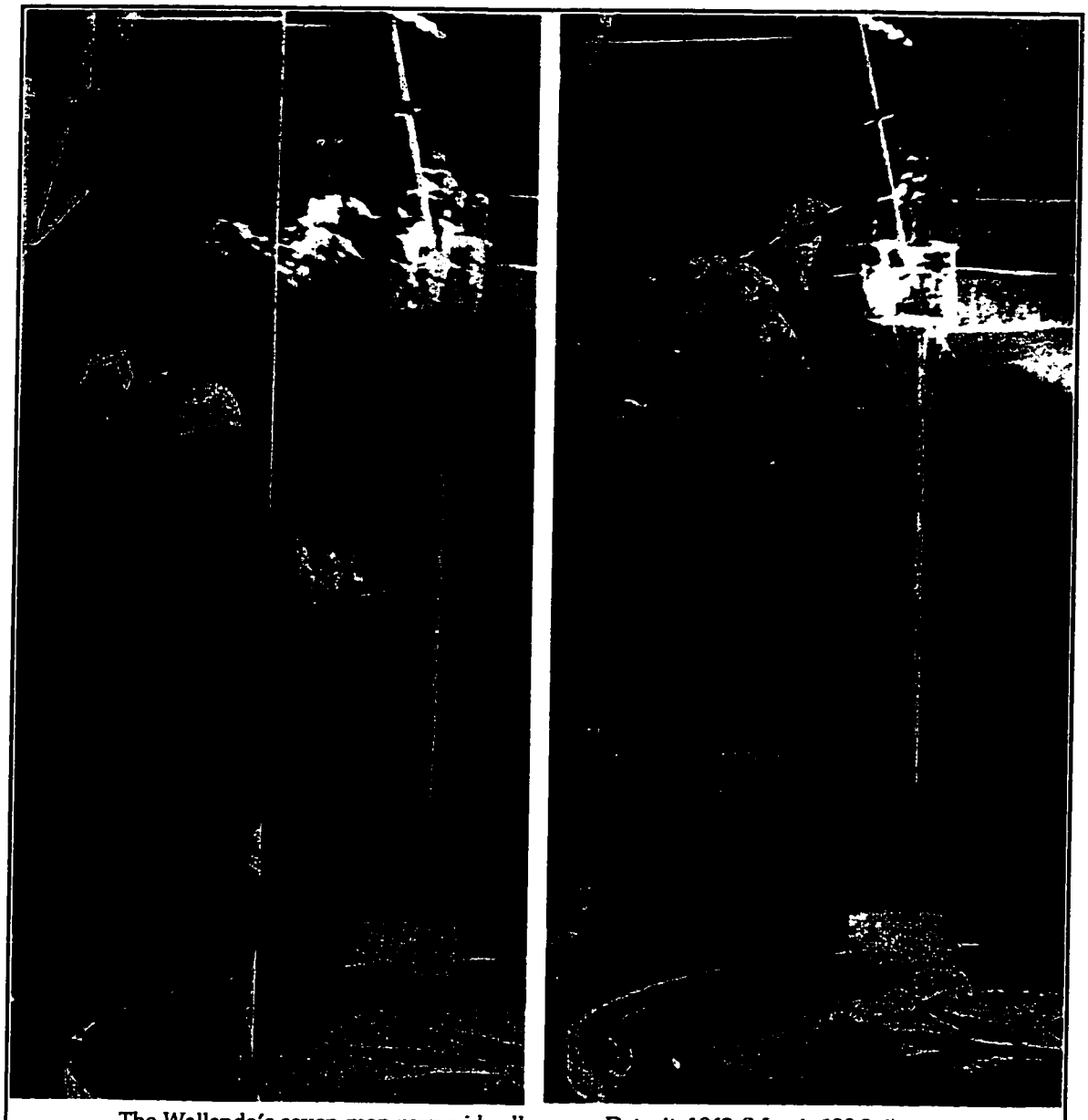
These self defeating efforts nullify the meaning of the act. Attempts to

make wire walking "safe" distance the audience rather than engage it. When an audience sees wires attached to a performer who should properly challenge death, it feels defrauded and disappointed. One can surely sympathize with the desire to live, but Petit casts the harshest light on such efforts and the feelings they arouse:

> The terrain of the high wire walker is bounded by death, not by props. And when a wire walker inspires pity, he deserves death ten times over...true high wire walkers do not do such things (76).

Despite painstaking preparation and relentless rehearsing, high wire falls do happen. The most renowned high wire disaster occurred in Detroit in 1962. (A detailed performance analysis of that walk forms the subject of Chapter 6 following.) The Wallendas, an old European circus family specializing in the high wire, capped their act with the seven-man pyramid, a daring confection that thrilled audiences all over the world. Two walkers would lead out. A pole stretched between them harnessed to their shoulders, upon which a third man stood. Behind them marched a similar trio. Yet another pole spanned the distance between the men on the second tier. Delicately poised on that pole, a young woman sat in a chair. On that fateful night in Detroit, the lead walker, a young performer new to the act, had trouble holding his balance pole and tossed it upward slightly so as to get a new grip. Instead, he lost control of that vital prop, and, like a house of cards, the whole, carefully constructed, painstakingly rehearsed trick collapsed. Three walkers plunged the 36 feet to the ring below. Of those, two died and the third went into a coma paralyzed from the waist down.

Miraculously, some managed to cling to the wire. Two escaped and



The Wallenda's seven-man pyramid collapses—Detroit, 1962 (Morris 120.2-4)

crossed over to the staging platforms without serious injury. The wire mangled Karl Wallenda, leader of the troupe, who sustained a broken pelvis and a double hernia. The girl on top, named Jana, clutched onto Karl's back as she fell and Karl, with the help of his brother Herman, held onto her until a net could be improvised below. When released from their saving grip,

however, she fell poorly and sustained a concussion when her head hit the concrete. The girl never again went up on the high wire. True to show business tradition, the surviving uninjured members of the Wallenda troupe, Herman and Guenther, joined by another wire walker hastily flown out from New York, stepped out on the wire the very next night (Morris 163-167).

Jana clings for life (Morris 120.4).

Karl Wallenda rebuilt the troupe and even reinstated the seven-man pyramid, although photographic evidence shows that in at least one performance a safety net had been added to the act (Morris 121.6). He continued walking the wire well into his seventies until, one windy day in San Juan, Puerto Rico, he lost his balance while crossing between buildings high above a street and plunged to his death.

Simply walking across the wire isn't enough—there must be embellishments. The everyday acts of life that sustain existence—eating, drinking, sleeping, reproducing—activities that are sufficient for almost all other life forms, leave human beings unfulfilled. Food must be magicked into cuisine, drink metamorphosed into wine, sleep transformed by water beds or satin sheets, and reproduction exalted into love. So, too, simply

crossing a wire leaves the high wire walker (and his audience) unsatisfied—there must be embellishments to the primal act of perambulation. What these consist of depends on the individual artist.

The intrepid Blondin crossed over the rapids of Niagara many times. Just walking the wire above such a cataract was stupefying to his contemporary audiences, but the daring tricks with which he embellished his many passages thrilled the on-lookers. On June 30, 1859, the day of his first crossing,

> 25,000 persons of all classes, ages and degrees of social rank were present, including statesmen, judges, divines, generals, members of Congress, capitalists, artists, newspaper editors, learned professors, blue-stocking belles and others who belonged to the educated and well-to-do circles (Banks 36)

watched fascinated as Blondin hoisted his balance pole and started across the rope from New York to Canada. At the midway point, he sat down on the rope. Further along the rope toward Ontario he stopped "laid at full length on his back for a moment, turned a back somersault, and regaining his feet walked rapidly to his landing place" (Banks 37). Twenty minutes later he made his way back to mid-span, unstrapped the large tripod-mounted camera he was carrying, set it up, focused, and photographed the spectators on the American side. After returning to the

Blondin takes a photo at Niagara Falls, 1859(Banks 36.1).

Canadian side, he ventured out once more carrying "a heavy lumbering chair" which he "placed ...upon the rope," and then

> seated himself...crossed his legs and gazed around with apparent unconcern. He then adjusted two legs of the chair on the cable, and again seated himself. Coming near the American shore, he got up and stood in the chair (Banks 37).

During his many other Niagara crossings, Blondin walked the rope "blindfolded, in a heavy sack made of blankets," pushed a wheelbarrow, carried a man the full distance, walked shackled head-to-foot, and before the Prince of Wales, crossed on stilts (Banks 38-41).

Blondin carries a passenger at Niagara and enjoys a glass of wine at London's Crystal Palace (Petit 36).

In other venues during his long career, Blondin embellished his act with tremendous creativity. At Jones' Woods he crossed the high wire with baskets on his feet. At London's Crystal Palace, he wrestled a stove out on the wire and cooked an omelette while costumed as a "chef de cuisine" (Banks 46, 78). A newspaper engraving in London's *Penny Illustrated Newspaper* dated October 12, 1861, shows Blondin mid-span on a rope at the Crystal Palace seated at a table and hoisting a glass of champagne in a toast to the audience (Petit 36).

Other performers throughout the centuries have created an amazing variety of stunts. Maria Spelterini fired a machine gun over a bull ring in

Barcelona in 1882 (Petit 36). Others have roller skated, bicycled, and bicycled while doing a head stand. Still others have done cartwheels, true somersaults (feet to feet) forward and backward, headstands, somersaults over partners, handstands, and one arm handstands. They have jumped rope, jumped through paper hoops, jumped over partners, and juggled. A wire walker can always wear a disguise as Blondin did when he wore an ape suit, play a musical instrument, mime drunkenness, or dance. Probably none will follow the innovation of Madame Saqui, who created "historical frescoes to the glory of Emperor Napoleon, all by herself on the tightrope" (Petit 29-51). It is not enough to live, one must *do* something with one's life. Similarly it is not enough to simply cross the wire, one must *do* something.

The performance of the high wire walk serves as a living metaphor and as such can be broken down into its component parts, analyzed, and its meaning rendered using the framework of the various applicable codes. In the category of performance code, an analyst would look first at the venue and circumstance of the event— the where and why of the performance. A clandestine crossing between the towers of the World Trade Center means something different than a performance that is part of a three ring circus, both to the performer and the spectator. How many performers on the wire? One? Two? Or does the act require the coordination of several performers, as in the Wallenda seven-man pyramid? The height of the wire, its thickness and length, the time of day, temperature, wind, size and make-up of audience all inform the meaning of the event. The performance code requires analysis of safety measures taken. Is there a net? "Mechanics?" Are counterweights hung below the wire and attached to a crossing device such as bicycle that

effectively eliminate the need for performer balance? How many cavalettis are used and what is the spacing? Is there a second wire?

The audience must be factored into the performance code. As described above, tens of thousands, running the gamut of society, watched Blondin at Niagara. Many had traveled hundreds, some thousands, of miles to witness the event. When Petit crossed the twin towers, his audience consisted of a fate-gathered collection of individuals who found themselves, for whatever reason, in lower Manhattan early on the morning of August 7, 1974. Those with the best view were no doubt the New York City policemen stationed on the towers to arrest the trespassing funambulist. So audience proximity and angle of view also figure into the performance code as well as the audience's perception of the degree of risk.

In analyzing the performer code one must take into account the age, sex, physiognomy, and physical condition of the high wire artist[s]. What kind of costume does the performer wear and what does it mean? Blondin wore an ape suit. Madam Saqui performed with a beard on and dressed as a pilgrim from Compostelle (Petit 30). Does the performer use a balance pole? What is its size? How thick is it? What is its weight and length? What sorts of embellishments does the performer add to his act? Are they unique to him or her or are they stock?

Cultural and historical codes figure in the performance and play a part in determining the meaning of the performance event. There is an international perception that Jay Cochrane's walk across the Yangtze River was staged by the Chinese government to ameliorate the anger of local citizens over the building of a dam that will flood their homes. Did the ploy

work? Indications are that the event, while certainly a triumph for Cochrane, was a financial failure.

> The locals turned out to be much less interested than expected: Only about 10,000 tickets were sold perhaps not too surprising, given that they cost 100 yuan ($12) each, while workers rigging the wire were paid seven yuan a day (Winchester 23).

There is no evidence of how the performance was was received by the Chinese people. According to Cochrane, hardly an impartial observer, the people flocked to see the act by the hundreds of thousands with millions more watching on television and the reaction was adulatory. He claims that the experience was "like ten Michael Jacksons going there" (Appendix A 119). Whether all this was sufficient to assuage the pain of loss and relocation is an unanswered political question. One doubts it.

A complex of historical codes would certainly be at work in Petit's recreation of Blondin's Niagara crossings for the IMAX film *Niagara: Miracles, Myths, and Magic*. Not only would one expect the performance to attempt an accurate historical recreation, but the film itself would carry all the signs and signifying practices of the era in which it was made.

High wire acts, once a fairly common form of diversion, have faded from the public's consciousness resulting in a diminished appreciation for the skill. Many factors contribute to this situation. Certainly competition for spectators' attention is keener now than ever before in the history of human kind. The glut of entertainment with its variety of forms makes it harder for an event to survive that truly depends on a live audience for its impact.

Recorded entertainment—film, radio, television, and the various audio media—has separated performers and audience to an enormous degree. The inflation of spectacle in these media has led to greater audience expectation. They want more thrills. But to provide these thrills while not killing people, makers of moving images increasingly rely on special effects, stunt doubles, and computer wizardry to deliver truly unbelievable sights. An audience knows that a valuable commodity such as Arnold Schwarzenegger cannot *really* be clinging to the wings of a Harrier jump jet forty stories above the ground as was seen in *True Lies* (1994). Tom Cruise could not *really* have been hurled by the blast of an exploding helicopter onto the back of a TGV train rocketing through a tunnel on its way to Paris in *Mission: Impossible* (1996). The sure knowledge of the essential fakery of such sights has dulled the appreciation for true risk. There is a perception that dangerous acts are somehow made safe, that no one would willingly place himself on the edge of death. People I have talked to regarding this project seem genuinely astonished to learn that a men like Philippe Petit or Karl Wallenda would cross a wire far above the ground without at least a safety net not thinking or realizing that a fall from the top of the World Trade Center would render any net useless. Usually their eyes grow large and they utter a comment that such an act is insanely suicidal.

These attitudes and perceptions may be attributed to the tendency of America's increasingly litigious society to limit risk so as to limit liability, but they also put a damper such death defying acts as the high wire. What community can dare to sponsor an event where the performer might fall and kill himself causing an audience member to have a heart attack and sue? As

the events become rarer, they fade from the public consciousness. Shakespeare defined the problem in another context:

> The present eye praises the present object:
> ...things in motion sooner catch the eye
> Than what not stirs. (*Troilus and Cressida,* III.3.180-184)

Crossing the high wire, like all death defying acts, celebrates human mortality by baiting the grim reaper. The audience lives with the performer, pulls for him, and doesn't want to see a horrifying disaster, no matter what they might say to the contrary. At the moment of failure an audience cannot help but empathize and so suffer with the performer. When the risk is real, the performer comes away exhilarated by his own existence and the spectator, who has bonded with the funambulist, shares both the risk of emotional trauma and the vicarious triumph of cheating death, and gains thereby a piece of that thrill. The failure of the high wire walker is failure for the spectator and the most vivid reminder that death is king and awaits all.

Chapter 4

Man in Black/Man in White

"I do not take any risk."—Philippe Petit

Performance Analysis

In this section of the thesis, I will analyze Philippe Petit's *Concert in the Sky,* Jay Cochrane's crossing of the Yangtze River Gorge in China, a cinematic recreation of Karl Wallenda's circus innovation, the seven-man pyramid, as well as my own novice attempts at wire walking. I will identify the *performance* code particulars as they pertain to the high wire generally and then apply them to the particular act under scrutiny. I will also identify the elements of individual *performer* code and similarly apply them to the specific performance under consideration. For the performance code I will examine the following elements: venue, conditions, context, content, and risk.

Venue is where the event occurs and includes the actual physical location and the resultant elements of height and distance. The conditions are weather (if outside), time of day, light—any element that would bear on the senses of the performer. The determiners of context are the larger circumstances of the crossing and must include the political in terms of Cochrane's walk across the Yangtze, the economic and commercial for the circus world of Karl Wallenda, the Denver Center's World Theatre Festival as the *raison d'être* for Petit's creation, and for my walk, the circumstances of thesis research. In all of this, historical context—the era in which the crossing

occurs— also plays a significant role. Looking at the content of the act, each performance chapter will detail a description of what actually occurred. In addressing the performances, the following semiotic system will be used. After recounting the particulars of venue, conditions, and context, the content of the performances will be described in the present tense as though the event were unfolding here and now, which, in a way, when viewing and reviewing a video tape, it does. Finally, the analysis of the risk in the particular performance will include preparation, the ramifications of the other elements of the code in increasing or diminishing risk, and the unforeseen.

In analyzing the performer code as it applies to the individuals under consideration, I will look at the choices made by the performers in terms of content, production (costume, props, design of the act), styles of on-the-wire behavior, attitudes towards risk as far as can be known, and the meaning of the act as perceived by both me and the performer himself.

Conceived in 1984 as part of the the Denver Center for the Performing Arts' World Theatre Festival, Philippe Petit's performance piece *Concert in the Sky* incorporates story, music, and spectacle staged on multiple levels within a 100-foot high atrium called the Galleria. Alone among the world's wire walkers, Petit elevates the act of walking the high wire beyond the realm of stunt. To achieve this, Petit turns the death defying feat of crossing a wire suspended high above the ground from a piece of dare-deviltry into an element of a larger theatrical purpose. Not enough for the act to stand alone with self-evident meaning, it must carry significance beyond the thrill of

moment and the triumph of the performer. In interviews, Petit repeatedly seeks to distance himself from the worlds of circus and stunt men.

> If you study wire walkers in history and the modern time, you will see that most [are] circus people, circus oriented, acrobats, stunt men, daredevils or record breakers and you will find no artists in them. You will find nobody who draws a knot, who writes a poem about the wire, who writes a book about the wire (Appendix B 146).

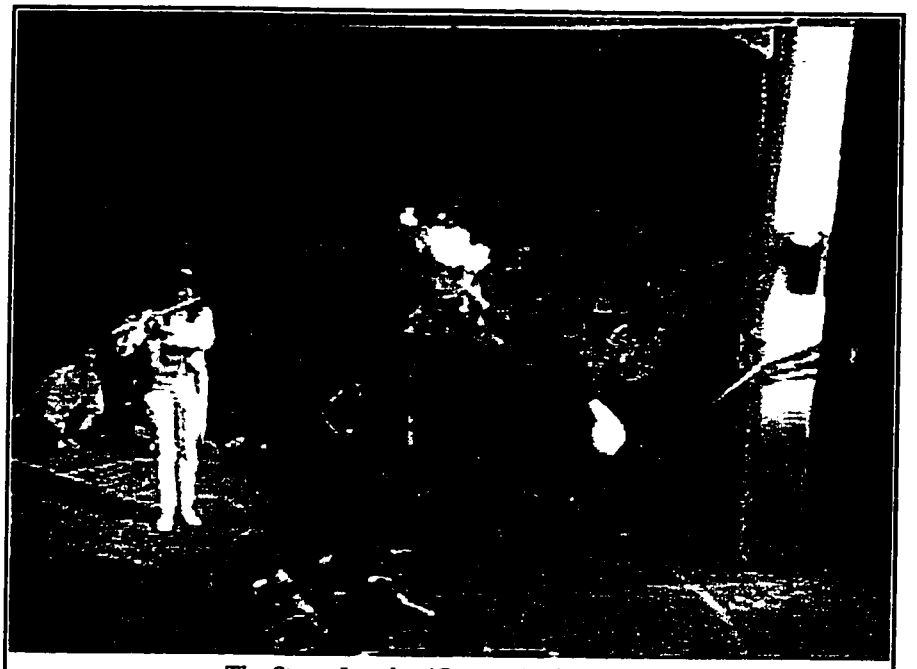
In *Concert in the Sky,* Petit created an autobiographical narrative limning his personal progression from street juggler to an ethereal, god-like sky walker. He incorporated audience interaction, other performers (a female character, musicians), settings both found and created, costumes that reinforce the theme, and since the performance was done at night, theatrical lighting.

The Performance

On the floor of the Galleria, a young female flautist dressed in white tie and tails plays a haunting melody, then hides in a circular metal urn and pulls a lid over the opening. A loud knocking echoes, then a black hat thrusts through a blue curtain just below an outsized padlock. Another knock and a man (Petit) pokes his head through to see if it is safe to enter. Obviously he enters clandestinely into some private place. The man, all clad in black, rides into the performance space on a unicycle to the cheers of the crowd seated and standing with keen self discipline behind a chalked circle. Not a thief at all, but a street performer, the man-in-black carries a rope and other props in a bag. One end of the rope gets securely tied to a concrete pillar, the other end stretches across the shoulders of audience members pulled as tight as their

strength can muster.

After Petit salutes the audience and is about to begin his street juggler act, the flute, amplified by wireless microphone, is heard again. Petit stalks the siren song to its source, uncovers the girl and helps her out of the container. He then chalks a small circle and confines her in it as he starts to perform the small miracle of his sidewalk act. The flautist plays an up-beat tune as Petit walks the slack low rope with flaming torches, first kneeling down then juggling the fiery sticks. The film cuts to the flautist, escaped now from the chalk circle, walking above in the parking structure that flanks one side of the Galleria. This brief portion of the show over, Petit mounts his unicycle, acknowledges the audience applause with a tip of his hat and rides out of the circle carrying his tools.

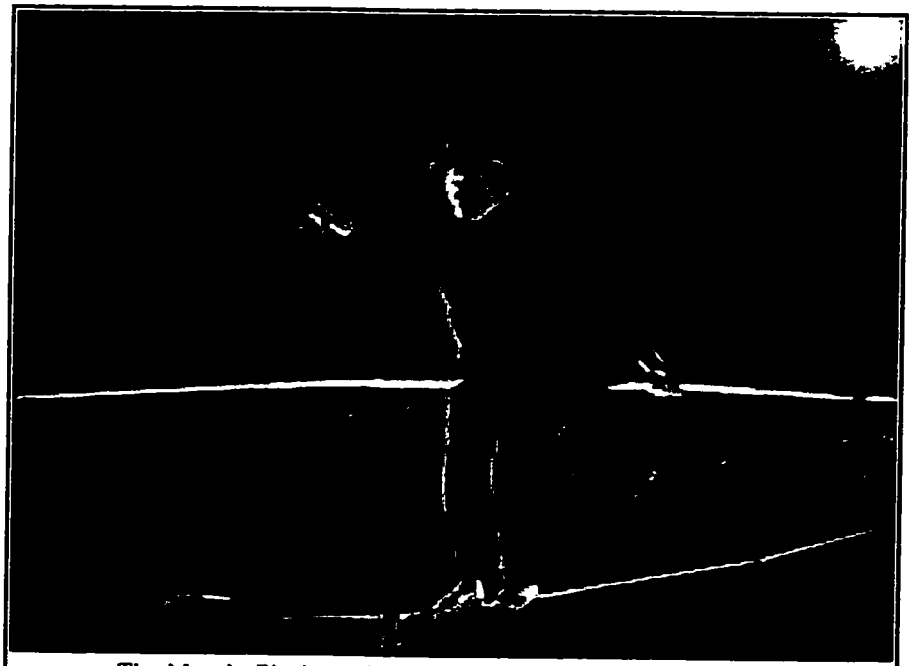


The Street Juggler (*Concert in the Sky*).

The second act begins with a shot of the flautist, transformed by a feathered headdress and gossamer wings, seated on a white studio grand

piano suspended by steel cables high above the Galleria floor, still playing the melody that so enchants the man-in-black. Looking for her and escaping from the cops (according to Petit in the voice over narration), the juggler scales the outside of the parking structure in the daring manner of a free hand mountaineer. The viewer can see that the audience is not only on the floor of the Galleria, but on all levels of the parking structure as well.

Having attained a height level with the girl, Petit finds that the way across and closer to the enchanting siren can only be achieved by crossing the high wire stretched 80 feet above the audience below. His desire conquering his fear, the earthbound juggler seizes the balance pole and ventures out onto the wire tentatively placing one bare foot slightly ahead of the other. With eyes cast down and glued to the wire, the camera reveals Petit making a great show of fear and hesitation, playing the scene for comedy before the appreciative audience. He lifts his legs high in a exaggerated show of care,



The Man in Black reaches for safety (*Concert in the Sky*).

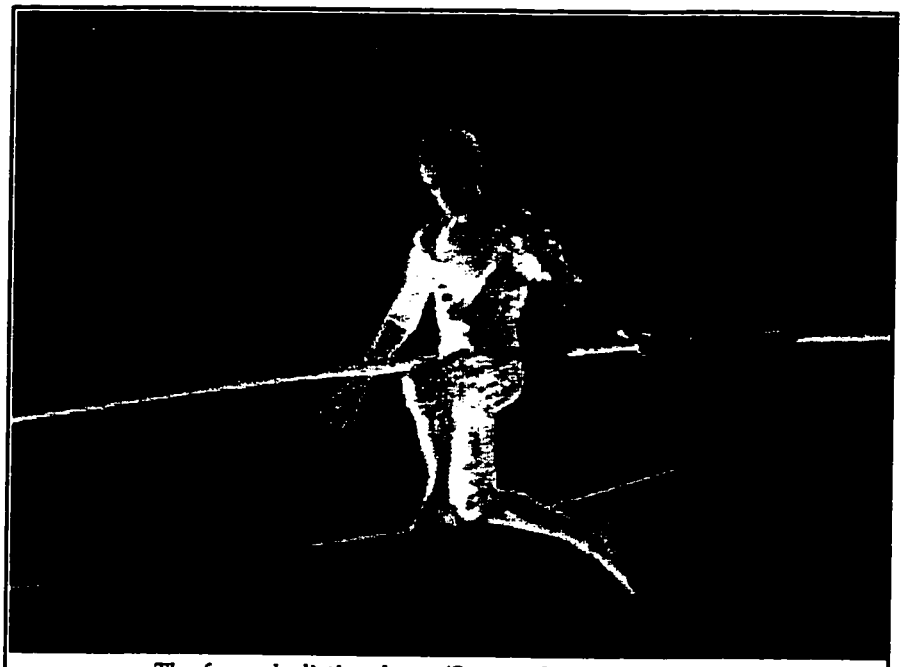
shakes his hand then his foot in an apparent sign of fatigue. As he nears the platform on the far side of the wire, he stops and reaches out for it. He then crooks a finger to beckon it, then tries to wave it closer. Clearly the mountain will not come to Mohammed, so with great trepidation he moves forward and then, within four feet of his goal, Petit pretends to miss his footing and almost slip off the wire. The audience reacts with a predictable gasp. Having gained the small wire walker's platform, Petit quickly sits and hugs the post in relief as the audience thunders its applause.

The flautist then holds out a white bag to Petit and with a nod of her head indicates he should take it. Bag in hand, Petit rummages through it letting white feathers come tumbling out, cascading down from his height like a waterfall. He finds a conductor's baton in the bag while the audience hears the sounds of an orchestra tuning up. After stretching and yawning, the bird-girl flautist lies down on her piano for a nap and Petit finds a white costume in the bottom of the bag.

The third act gives us a transformed Petit in a form fitting costume, ruffled and gathered on one side, smooth on the other, his hair combed back and controlled. No longer the earthbound man-in-black, he is now a godlike presence in white. With no shred of the former hesitation, the radiant man-in-white acknowledges the audience with a sweep of his hand and hoists the balance pole while the orchestra starts up a tune that might have accompanied a performer in the last century. With eyes levelly locked on the horizon, the man-in-white begins to cross the high wire in long, gliding steps. Every aspect of this new character is clearly designed as the antithesis of the man-in-black. The man-in-white pauses at the center of the wire, kneels and

The Man in White glides on the wire (*Concert in the Sky*).

raises his hand in a funambulist's salute.



The funambulist's salute. (Source: *Concert in the Sky*.)

Back at the platform, the man-in-white lifts the baton and begins to conduct a fanfare in brass. Having crossed back to the center of the wire, Petit

perches stork-like on one leg, the balance pole across his thigh and conducts the brass ensemble, each member of which plays, from a different height and position around the Galleria, a lively, up tempo tune. A look of joy radiates from Petit's face as he lowers his leg and quickly completes his crossing.

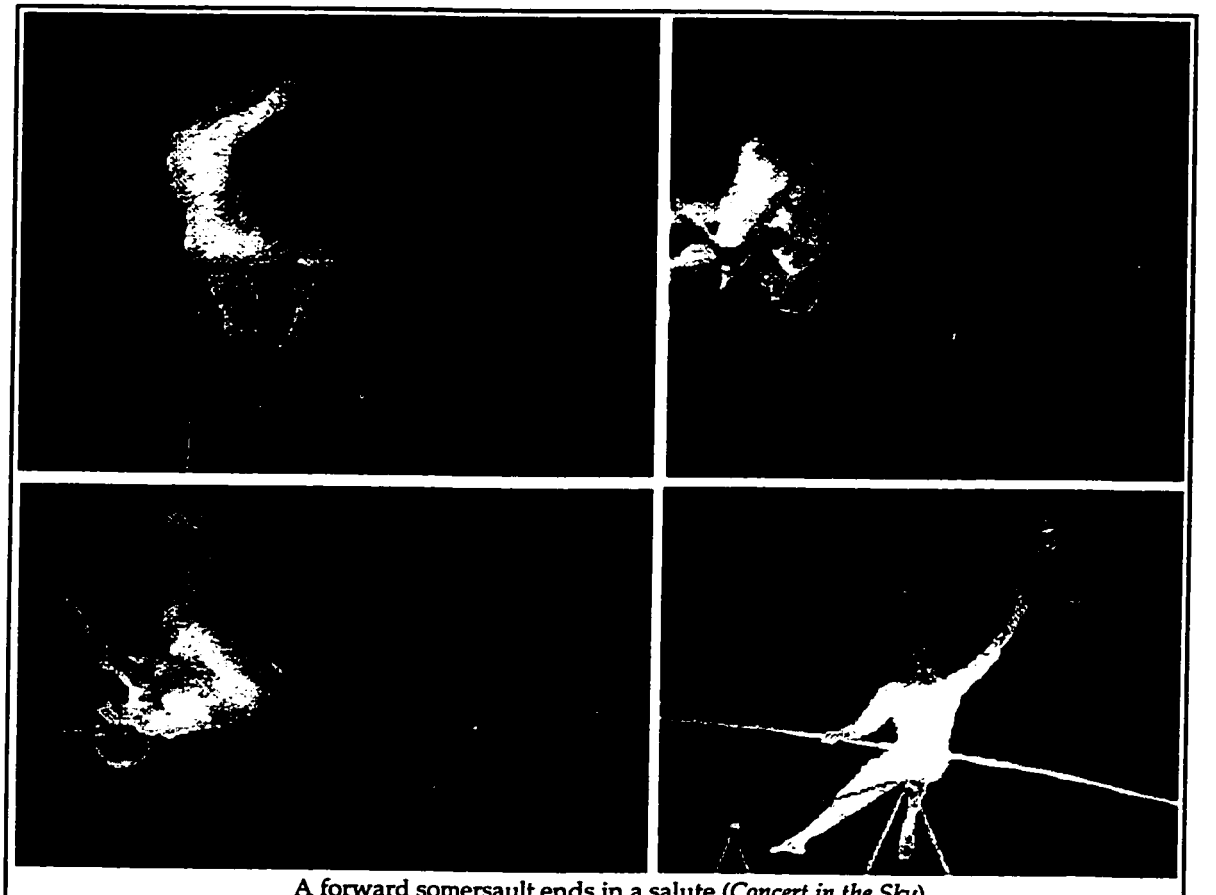
As Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" echoes in the space, Petit shows the audience a purple blindfold which he then secures in front of his eyes. Sightless, he lifts his balance pole and starts back across the wire then holds while the horns switch to the music of Erik Satie, the elegant *Trois Gymnopedié, no.1,* Slowly and regally, he continues the crossing, feeling the wire with his toe before stepping down firmly and transferring his

A blindfolded crossing (*Concert in the Sky*).

weight. Once more at the wire walker's platform, Petit whips off the blindfold and bows to the audience's enthusiasm. Then with a huge sweep of his arms he cues the band which plays Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever."

As a kind of encore, Petit silences the brass ensemble, picks up his pole

and crosses to the center of the wire where he sits down and to the audible amazement of the audience throws himself into a back somersault. Then with elfin glee on his face somersaults forward to his original position, then back again and with a huge smile reaches down and pats the wire as though it



A forward somersault ends in a salute (*Concert in the Sky*).

were the fearless stead who had just carried him through battle. The man-in-white stands, steps along the wire, stops, places the pole behind his head and on his shoulders and whips around in the opposite direction and prances, practically runs, back along the wire. He takes his final bow. The bird-girl flautist stands on her piano and salutes the crowd. Petit once more cues the music and the show is over.

Analysis

The performance took place in the Galleria of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts as part of DCPA's World Theatre Festival. The wire was stretched across a distance of 60 feet at a height of 80 feet. Performed at night, *Concert in the Sky* benefited from mild weather with no significant wind. The contextual circumstances that brought Petit, the most famous wire walker in the world both then and now, to the Denver Center was an effort to enhance the prestige of the Festival and bring attention to a regional arts complex looking for national and international recognition.

In seeking to invest the act of walking the high wire with meaning beyond that of a mere stunt or athletic feat, Petit created not only a theatrical piece but recast his own performer code.

> This show to me was a milestone in my work because for the first time in my life I projected two characters— one that existed for many years and continued to exist which is me as a street juggler. Actually that was my first work besides magician at six years old and around sixteen I started as a street juggler in France and then all over the world. I created throughout now thirty years of work a comic character and I performed fifteen years in Paris, twenty years in New York and I keep performing all over the world. So I thought this character should meet the wire walker, the opposite, the man in the sky. So all black in the street and then all white in the sky and I wanted them to meet but I thought it was very hard and finally this performance gave me the opportunity to dare to do so. So although the performance in my opinion now is really childish and not really well conceived and directed and performed, it was

> still a very moving moment for me to have the street juggler not so much meet, but become, through the use of different levels and different wires, the man in the sky (Appendix B 157).

Petit left behind forever the circus and the cheap thrills of the stunt man and devoted himself to turning wire walking into art. In an interview, Petit described his efforts to transform the act of wire walking. "I tried... in the past twenty five years, [to bring] somehow the wire walking stunts into an art through my unique theatrical performance and my books and my vision" (Appendix B 146).

The loose narrative structure of the piece, the transformation of the performer from street juggler to high wire artist, mirrors Petit's efforts to theatricalize wire walking into art. Like the caterpillar that crawls to a height, makes a cocoon, and emerges as a butterfly who takes to the air, so, too, does Petit's character, the man in black, make the the same kind of transformational journey. He leaves behind the earth-bound life of street artist to become the ethereal sky walker clad all in white.

In the transition to the to the man-in-the-sky, Petit goes back in time. Through costume and attitude, he conjures an image out of the Nineteenth Century. When I first saw the video, I thought, "This is how Blondin might have looked." I asked Petit if that was part of his intention. He admitted that it was (Appendix B 157). When I transcribed his voice-over comments from the film, I found he had made an oblique reference to this notion.

> The man-in-white, very bullfighter-like who walks on the high wire in the clouds and this person is in fact the other side of me. It's a nice symbol to walk on the wire, because

> you are high above everything else on the ground and it's a kind of an escape from your own century (*Concert in the Sky*).

Philippe Petit is a complex man of contradiction. While denying that he takes any risk whatsoever, he nonetheless avers that his act is framed by danger and further that danger enhances the act.

> I think risk is an absurd, actually, an obscene concept in life. So in whatever I do in life and in my wire walking work, I do not take any risk and I will simply be stupid or suicidal if I would do so. Many people do but I don't (Appendix B 144).

This is certainly the prudent attitude of a mature man. Petit goes on to briefly sketch the steps he takes to minimize risk. But as he warms to his theme, contradictions begin to appear.

> So, it's very simple. In the discipline of wire walking, how can you reduce the risk to zero? Well, technically by being completely in control of the rigging and psychologically in control of what you're doing. Which means knowing your limits because we all have limits. And I do all that with passion because I happen to love what I do. And therefore there is no risk in what I do. There is a certain danger which is a noble danger, but that danger, I frame it, I control it. But I do not take any risk and whenever there is too much wind I don't go on the wire. Whenever there is something that is not right in the rigging, I repair it before getting on the wire. And I don't let others put my wire up; I do it myself. Of course with help. And therefore I am in no risk at all (Appendix B 144).

For this high wire artist, danger (never risk!) is a vital aesthetic component of his act and serves several purposes for the artist in his creative process and for the audience in their perception. Petit jealously guards his art and is almost grudging in sharing it with others. The difficulty and danger of wire walking serves to keep an audience from intruding.

> Danger also needs definition because it is used in many ways. The perception of danger is something that ...ennoblishes [sic]...I don't know the exact words exist...you know, gives nobleness...to your life and to your work. And danger is in my opinion a necessary ingredient in the cooking of an artistic life. The danger is a little bit the frame by which the work of art is kept, I don't know, grand and alive. If there was no danger, and I'm talking about physical and psychological danger, in the life of an artist, there will be very poor results. So that danger in a way is the boundary, is the wall that prevents people [from trampling] upon sacred land, the sacred land of art (Appendix B 154).

In distinguishing the artist from the run-of-the-mill person, Petit passionately exalts the danger and difficulty of all artistic endeavor. This notion of danger (risk) has become more complex migrating from an immediate element of performance to a general artistic principle. He equates the physical danger of the wire walker who literally risks his life with those who put their lives in their art:

> If you didn't need thirty years of practice to become a card magician or fifty years of practice to become the world's best violinist, it would be a shame [if] anybody could just pick up a violin and in ten minutes play something. Well it's wonderful you can't. It creates a boundary between the

> people who play with life from the tip of their finger and put no soul in [anything] and the people, the mad people, who put their life into something. Thank god there is difficulty, technique to be overcome, danger that creates a wall around those fields. Thank god (Appendix B 154).

Petit's philosophy aside, what is the risk in *Concert in the Sky?* The primary risk, of course, as in all high wire crossings, is a fall resulting in death or at minimum severe injury. This is the perception of the casual audience member. From the artist's point of view, however, risk has been minimized and the frame of danger pushed out. Petit has supervised all aspects of the rigging seeing to it himself, trusting no one. He brings twenty years of skilled experience to the act. And although the risk may not truly be "zero," as he claims above, one can after all drown in one's own bath tub, prudent caution, confidence bred from experience, and psychological fitness diminish the probabilities of disaster to near zero.

And what of the embellishments that thrill the audience with their apparent daring, the blindfold crossing and somersaults? How much do they add to the risk of the act? Avoiding the charged word "risk," I asked Petit about the added difficulties of a blindfolded crossing. The simple question evoked a typically complex and contradictory Petit reply filled with extremes. He scorns the act as pandering to the the audience, yet extols it pridefully as "amazing" and "a great exercise." Before answering the immediate question, he delivers a preamble:

> For me it's very easy. It's not difficult at all. I hate it because it's really a symbol of circus work and I really dislike to use the wire as a showcase to give the audience bits and pieces of acrobatic feats. It's completely uninteresting and I don't

> do that anymore unless maybe it is called for for a specific reason. But surprisingly as I was learning, by myself, wire walking around fifteen, sixteen years old, one of the first things I toyed with [was the] blindfold, the real blindfold, because... if you've studied circus you know that there's no such thing as a real blindfold. They all put [on] a blindfold and three layers of whatever, but you can see through [it]. But the real blindfold is actually a great exercise for a wire walker. But I hate to have done it and I hate to do it. Artistically speaking it's really trying to prove something. But sometimes it could be amazing. Maybe in a film or in a special performance [in which] you have created another difficulty, another barrier, and maybe you have created another continent [in] which [you] see more because your eyes are closed.

Having thus clarified his position on the subject, Petit goes on:

> But to answer your question— technically for me, Philippe Petit, it's a very easy thing. I can go back and forth blindfolded even without a balancing pole [and] I think I am the only one that can do that. Maybe [it's] because I listen a lot to the other sense[s] of balance, other than what your eyes give you—and there are a lot. For example, the weight of the balancing pole, although vague, indicates in your finger tips the sense of the vertical. And then your feet gliding on the wire, which nobody [else] does because gliding is slippery, also gives you a sense of the horizontality [sic]. So I am listening to those senses and I can do the real blindfold but I am completely against it and I find it silly (Appendix B 157-58).

The final thrills of the act, the somersaults forward and backward, are spontaneous expressions of exuberance. They are improvisations. They seem

outside the scope of safety. How dangerous? How does such boldness fit within the concept of reducing the risks of an inherently dangerous act to zero? I asked if the somersaults were unplanned. Petit replied, "Yes, always, always. Unplanned but rehearsed for fifteen years. Unplanned that night" (Appendix B 155). Philippe Petit makes room in his high wire acts for improvised elements taken from repertoire. The somersault is not a new embellishment trotted out on a whim, but a movement long in the making.

> This backward somersault I spent years and years learning and perfecting. On the high wire, in my performances, there is always some part for improvisation and it gives me this extra feeling inside of me and this extra look for the audience that is a kind of blessed freedom. I think [there] should be in any actor's work a certain amount of room for improvisation (Appendix B 155).

In *Concert in the Sky,* in his comments on it and on the art of high wire walking in general, Philippe Petit reinforces the key ideas of the developing theory of physical risk-in-performance. Daring innovation and risk as an aesthetic element are part of Petit's art and were evident in his Denver Center performance and in his boldest creation, the World Trade Center crossing. But what of the the third element of audience involvement? What is Petit's perception of the audience and his relationship to it? The first probing mention of audience and their perception of risk drew an immediate, annoyed interruption:

> I don't care about that question because the way I perform, it's a little bit, or it's completely like an artist or a painter taking a canvas and starting something. It is not from the

> beginning geared to the collector or the amateur of art or the sale or whatever. It is an expression. So you cannot start an expression by some politics or by some conniving after thoughts, before thoughts or side thoughts. You only can start an expression because it burns within you and then [if] you're a writer you have to take a pen, you're a painter you have to take a charcoal, or you're a wire artist, and there none besides me, and you have to get on the wire to express yourself (Appendix B 147).

He resented what the audience represents—the business side of performing —because of the constrictive pressures it puts on the artist.

> In show business the audience is extremely important. You have to make them applaud. You have to please them. You have to please the director of the circus. You have to please the agent. You have to play this game... (Appendix B 148).

Petit even went so far as to deny the reality of the audience. "It doesn't exist. It doesn't exist the day of the show when they come in" (Appendix B 148). But as the high wire artist worked his way through the idea, he came to a contradictory position.

> I have absolutely no connection with the audience except the real important moment which is when I share, I offer, I give my performance. And yet I need an audience, if not I am rehearsing in my garden. And in that sense I do not care if the audience marvels, detests, cries, all those things. I care after. I am interested what the audience response was. But during the show I am too busy doing my performance and I should not care. And a good actor should not look at the audience. It is a very strange theatrical miracle being exposed there on stage and my high wire is my stage, completely disregarding the audience. And this noble

> disregard is actually what makes very interesting and important and meaningful theatrical performance (Appendix B 149).

After denying the audience's existence and scorning them with lofty disdain, the critical issue of empathetic link brought forth a completely unlooked for response. Asked if he could feel a connection to the audience, Petit answered,

> Absolutely. And it is very important to feel it because if you don't feel it, then you are insensitive. When I say the actor should lock himself or herself in his own world, it is not blind and ear-less and nose-less. It is with all the senses ... so you feel, you hear, you can almost grasp the audience. On the high wire, to be specific, I often can hear the murmurs of the crowd even if they are miles away or hundreds of yards away. I am very, very sensitive. I hear them much better than in any other situation. My eyesight goes very wide. My fan of looking goes almost to the side of my ears (Appendix B 150).

And can the audience be felt from even so great a height as the World Trade Center?

> Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I could perceive from the walk between the twin towers, I could see the traffic, the people moving toward the plaza. They were like little ants and they were slow motion like. And I could hear the sirens of the police and the brouhaha below and the orders and counter-orders of the authorities. And I could hear the cheers of the people when I was taking a bow and saluting the towers. I could hear a response that came from a quarter mile below and grew up to my ears. Oh, yes. Absolutely (Appendix B 150).

Petit's self-absorbed point of view, whether based on artistic principle

or political conviction, does not seem to allow him to consider the effect his performance may have on an audience. Did they share his thrill and exhilaration? What risks did they run? Were they endangered by the act? Could some member of the audience have been crushed by a falling wire walker or psychologically traumatized by the spectacle? From his statements, such questions must be asked by someone else. The answers, however, would be of interest to the famed wire walker.

> I am very interested, actually, when I read an account after a performance. I am interested to see the perception of the one[s] below and sometimes they put... meaning to my work that I didn't [intend]. But that's fine. Everybody finds their own meaning in anything (Appendix B 156).

This relationship between audience and performer, the artist's intentions in creating an act, and the audience's construction of its meaning are more fully discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER 5

Jay Cochrane's Yangtze River Skywalk

"Walking the wire is not so much the art as it is the self confidence and determination." —Jay Cochrane

Jay Cochrane skywalking at the EPCOT Center, Orlando, Florida (Wilson: Promotional still photo).

As much as Jay Cochrane might like it otherwise, the spectacular high wire crossing he performed over the Yangtze River on October 28, 1995, is inextricably bound up in politics and controversy. Conceived by the Chinese government to celebrate the construction of the Three Gorges Dam and, not coincidentally, to distract the residents of the region from their grief at the inevitable flooding of their homes, The Great China Skywalk, as it was dubbed, was intended to glorify the project. To Cochrane the venture was about a glorious feat of wire walking at an incomparable venue. To environmentalists and human rights advocates, it was a shamelessly cynical attempt to distract attention from the issues surrounding the building of the largest dam the world has ever seen.

In an effort to tame the rampages of the Yangtze whose ravaging floods have caused death and destruction for millennia, the Chinese will move millions of residents from hundreds of villages that will disappear beneath the waters of the man-made lake the new dam will create. The forced evacuation of these people dismays those who watch the never ending human rights abuses in China. Environmentalists fear that the project will wreak disaster as the polluted, silty waters of the Yangtze are trapped behind the dam. Scientists wonder if the absent flushing action of flowing water will allow a build-up of pollutants and, as the river-born silt is trapped, massive dredging might have to be done continuously to keep the lake from filling up with mud. The laudable goals of containing floods and providing a huge amount of hydro-electric power are offset by the obvious dangers, human costs, and world concern. Once more, a man on a tight rope becomes the metaphor for the human condition, at least it seems so in the narrow terms of this one issue. China walks the wire on this one.

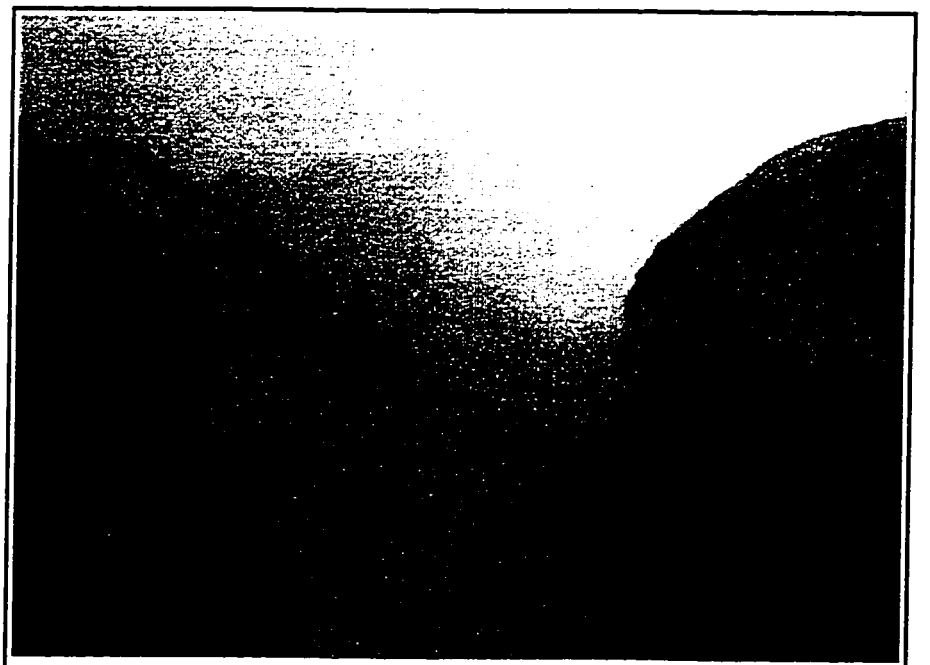
Cochrane is decidedly defensive about the political aspect of his skywalk. When I interviewed Cochrane, it was the wire walker who brought up the unfavorable view the world has of China. "I hear all these negative things in Western media and television about China, but they don't know the real China. They really don't. They know the government, they don't know the people" (Appendix A 127). He went on to finesse the subject entirely, telling an extended story of how he used a kind of verbal judo to turn aside reporters who wanted comments on the dam project. After maintaining that it was "none of his business," that he was not there "on a political venue," that he was there "as an entertainer," and finally that he couldn't "really

make a comment on it until [he knew] more about it," he finally responded after additional prodding.

> I said to the translators, "Gentlemen. I would like you to translate what I am about to say word for word from English back into Chinese and don't change one word of it because my translators will tell me if you do." And I said to them, "First of all, what business is it of ours as a Western culture to tell the Chinese that they should not build their dam? It is their country. Let them do what they want. When we built the Hoover, the Coulee, and the Tennessee dam etc., did they tell us we should not build our dams? Of course not. And if they had, what would we have said to them? I'm sure it would not have been Merry Christmas. We seem to forget that two hundred years ago the Indians were chasing us across the desert. These people have been around for five thousand years. Something is to be said of that. Furthermore, it seems very strange to me...I don't lump all into this category, but a lot that I meet of journalists [sic] from the Western world— they only know how to print negative sensationalist stories. Do you not have the capacity or the capability to do a positive story? When you went to journalism school, did they not teach you how to do that? For once let's show our hosts that we really can do a positive story with a good ending. Any more questions?" That was the last time I was asked about the Three Gorges dam project (Appendix A 129).

Cochrane, despite his protestations, was aware of his situation. "I know I'm kind of a propaganda tool" (Appendix A 132). However, one cannot fault an entertainer too much for accepting a job and doing it, basing his decision on the narrow confines of his skills, rather than the broader

issues of politics. Not every performer can or should be a Richard Gere, who uses his art to take the Chinese to task over their brutal subjugation of Tibet. But art does not occur in a vacuum and context is context and when a performer such as Cochrane, seeking fame, leaves the confines of the world of circus for a larger stage, he runs the risk of being used and judged for that usage. The Roman emperors certainly knew the politics of spectacle as did the Nazis, as do the modern American political parties who vie for the services of Hollywood stars and other entertainers to flog their causes. In balancing his art against world opinion to bring off an incredible feat, Cochrane maintained his equilibrium and succeeded.



Qutang Gorge, Sichuan, China, October 28, 1995 (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

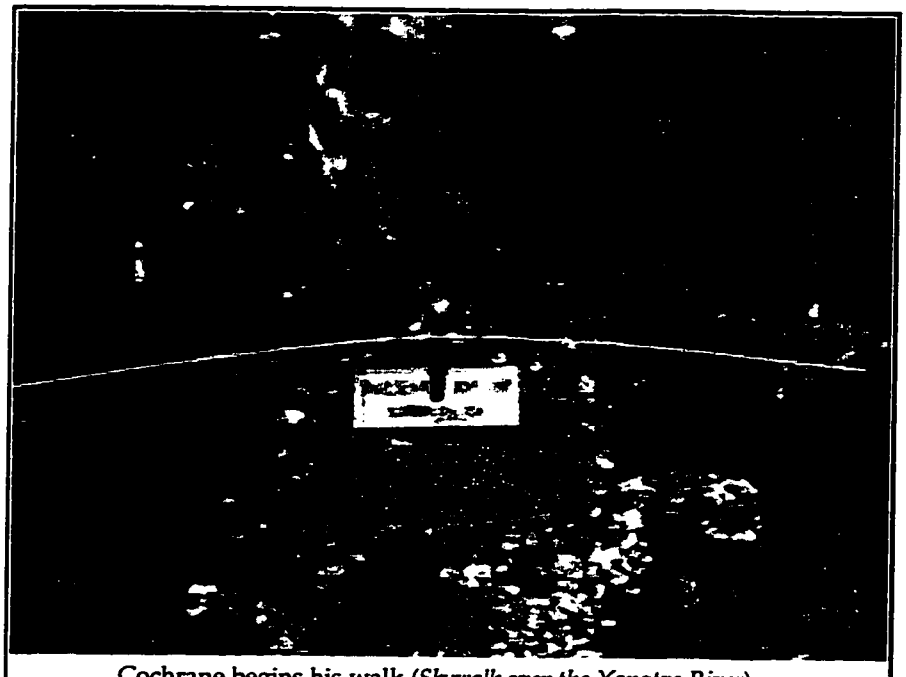
The Yangtze River is met by its tributaries, passing through the towering Three Gorges area of Sichuan province. Jay Cochrane and an army of Chinese workers suspended a custom-made, galvanized wire rope an inch

and an eighth in diameter across the 2,100-foot span of Qutang Gorge at a height of 1,365 feet above the river. The wire was then stabilized by 250,000 feet of guy wires attached to the walking wire at 130 points along the length. These guy wires, some of which were as much as 3,000 feet in length, were then anchored to the distant ground. According to Cochrane, "thirty-one tons of weight [were] suspended above the river" (Appendix A 122).

A press release from Cochrane's agent, Mike Wilson, maintains that there was an audience of 100,000 on hand to see this crossing, although Simon Winchester, reporting in the *Far Eastern Review* (March, 1996), said that only 10,000 tickets were sold. The truth no doubt lies somewhere in between. Cochrane himself say that the spectators were "everywhere. I mean hundreds of thousands of them. They climbed the mountains at two o'clock in the morning in the dark to see this" (Appendix A 127). The walk was televised via satellite to the nation adding, according to the claims of Cochrane, perhaps a billion more spectators electronically (Appendix A 136).

The Performance

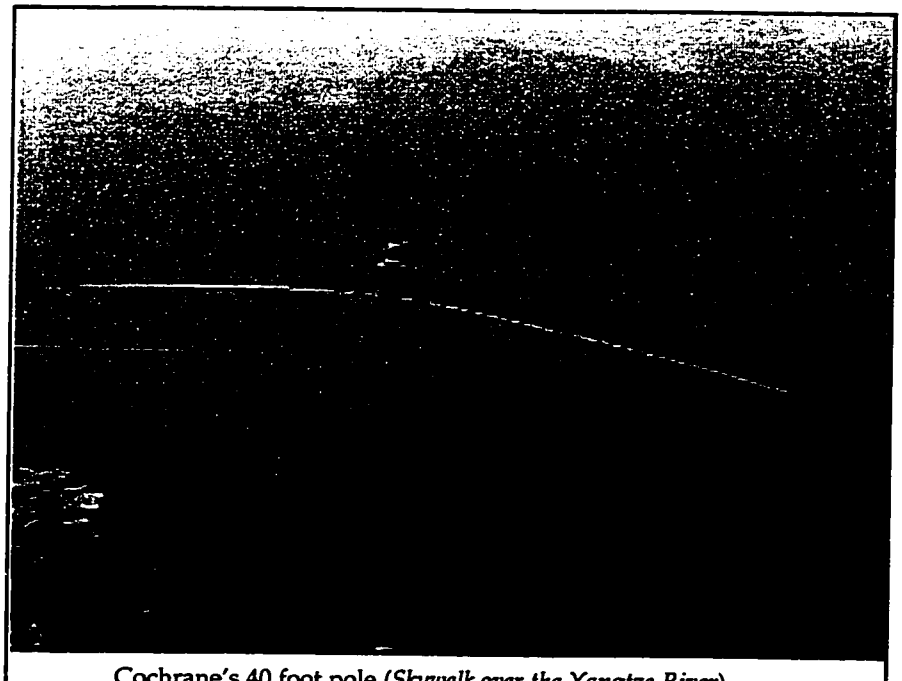
Dressed in a dark blue rhinestone studded jumper, sleeves slashed medieval-style, over a white turtleneck shirt and sporting dark glasses, the fifty-one year-old Cochrane steps out onto the wire wearing soft, buff colored shoes specially made by "a little Italian in Minneapolis," the soles of which are shaped to the wire either by design or use (Winchester). The weather is fair, the atmosphere hazy making visibility from the ground difficult. Flags behind him on the northern cliff known as Tiger Face reveal a stiff wind out of the east. The skywalker carries a forty foot titanium balance pole weighing



Cochrane begins his walk (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

60 pounds which is supported by a harness of Cochrane's own device.

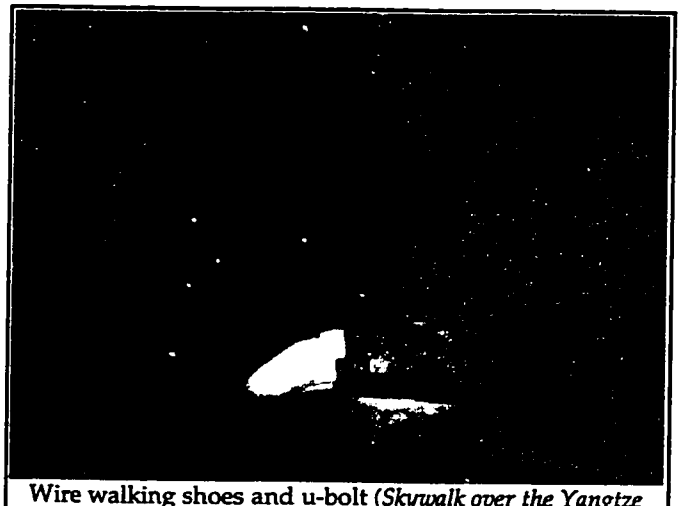
Eyes down, concentrating on a near spot on the wire, Cochrane slowly, deliberately, methodically, places one foot a few inches in front of the other.



Cochrane's 40 foot pole (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

The innovative harness helps support the 60 pound pole (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

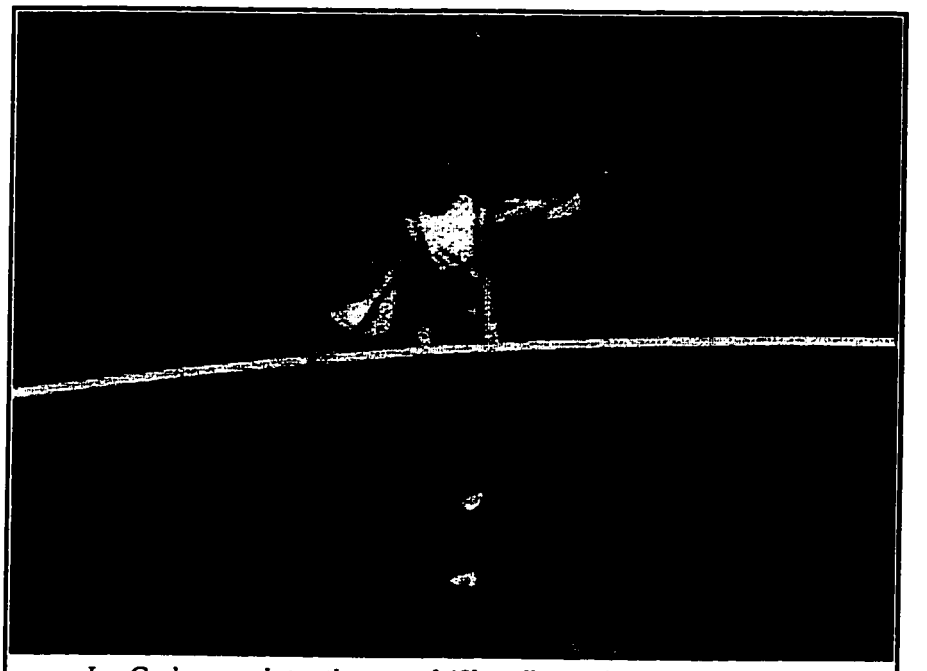
He reaches out with his toes and glides his foot on the wire a little bit before transferring his weight entirely. By fast-forwarding the video tape, one can clearly see that he sustains a steady rhythm throughout the 53-minute walk. Only the need to step over the large u-bolts that join the guy lines to the walking wire varies the cadence of movement.



Wire walking shoes and u-bolt (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

At mid-span, eyes still focused down on the wire, Cochrane salutes the crowd, lifting his left foot to his right knee, and, extending his left arm upward, gives a slight flourish of his hand. He sways gently on

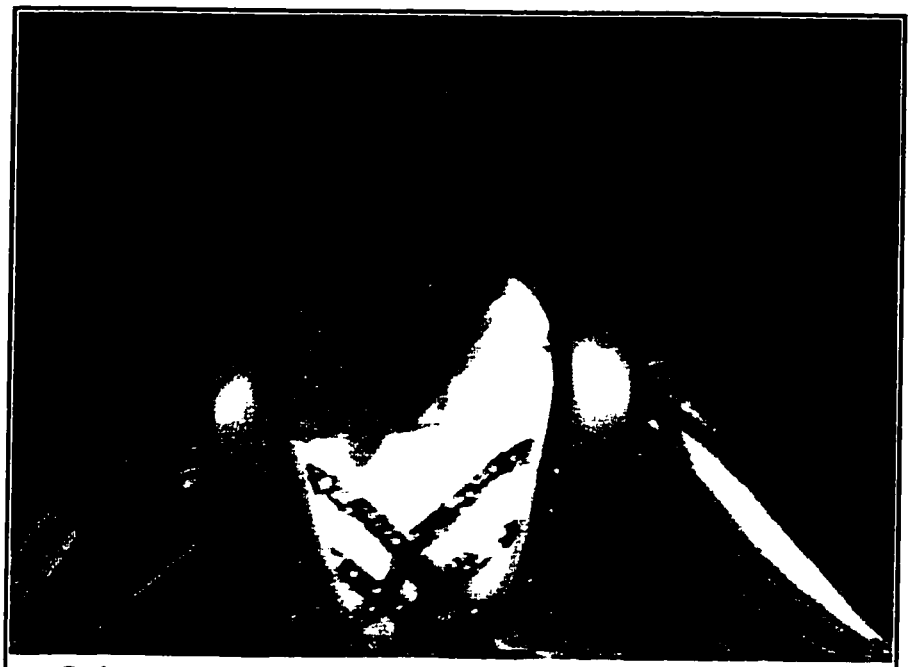
the wire and one can plainly see the wind moving the man on the wire as well as the foliage visible behind him. He holds the pose for six seconds and then, the harness bearing the weight, adjusts his grip on the pole



Jay Cochrane salutes the crowd (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

before starting again toward the southern cliff, the Lion Face. Throughout the entire walk, the camera shows the tremendous downward sag of the wire caused by the the great weight of the line and the distance it spans. Cochrane estimates the line drops "150 feet in the center" (Appendix A 122). This means that half the walk he is going downhill and half uphill.

As he nears the end of his walk he has slowed down and one can see his legs dip a bit as the wire angles upward. Very close to the Lion Face, he pauses to remove his dark glasses and hook them on his costume before resuming. Again his gaze never waivers or lifts away from the wire. As he nears the end, one can hear the crowd's excitement. A few steps from the finish platform, Cochrane lifts his eyes and a smile flickers across his face. On



Cochrane concentrates on the wire (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

the platform at last, he gives a brief wave to the nearby watchers and immediately turns his back and begins to strip off the pole harness. An assistant hands him a drink in a can and two Chinese girls place a lei over his head and hand him a bouquet. The walk is over.

Analysis

As a wire walker Jay Cochrane differs entirely from Philippe Petit. Rather than denigrating the circus, Cochrane fully embraces his roots, cheerfully telling interviewer after interviewer the story of how he ran away to join the circus at the age of 14, starting literally at the bottom cleaning up after the horses and gradually working his way into performing as an aerialist and eventually as a wire walker (Wilson: Promotional video). The artistic elements such as music, narrative, personality, and theatricality with which Petit invests his wire walking are entirely absent from Cochrane's

performances. Also missing from Cochrane's performer code are the embellishments seen in many other walkers, past and present. Cochrane is content to walk the wire in a straightforward manner, one step following the next. He doesn't lay down on the wire or walk blindfolded or somersault. There is no acting involved. He would never essay Blondin-style stunts such as carrying a passenger or dining on the wire. The only blip in his forward motion across the wire is a pause to kneel or lift an arm and leg in salute. A video supplied by agent Mike Wilson shows that Cochrane's method of crossing the wire has not changed in over twenty years. The video has a clip showing the wire walker's first skywalk in 1975. Crossing between two Toronto buildings forty stories up, he uses the same technique—head down, eyes fastened on the wire before him, steadily and carefully marching across the wire with infinite deliberateness (Wilson: Promotional video).

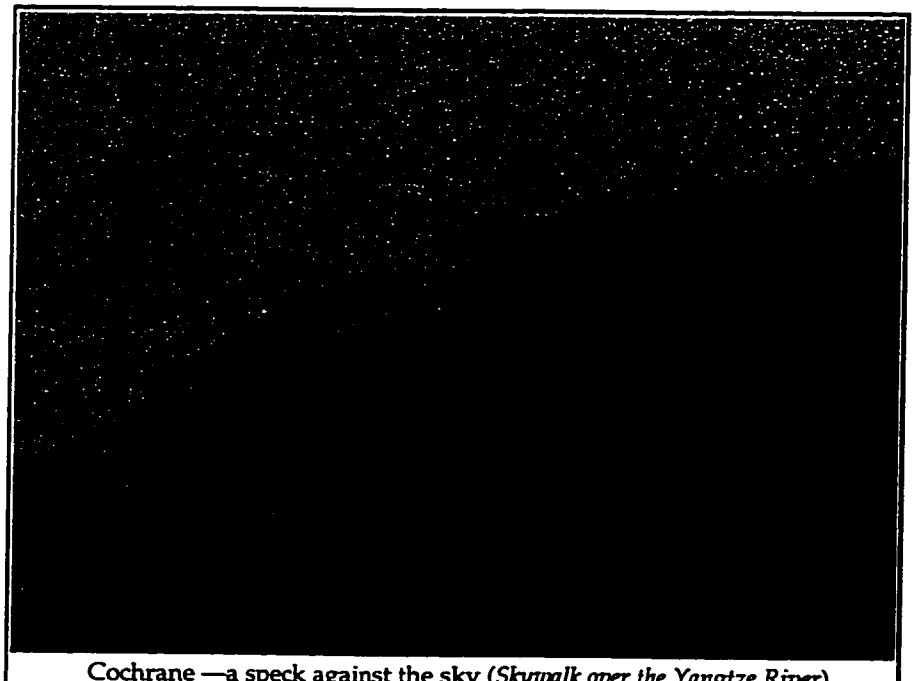
Cochrane's goal, now and in the past, is to find increasingly challenging venues to set Guinness-style wire walking records for height, length, and endurance. When younger, he set several endurance and distance records for walking the wire. He once walked for two-and-a-half miles by "traversing the wire 41 times" and lived on a wire for three weeks, a record that still stands (Wilson: Promotional video). In this aspect, he is more stuntman than artist. When he speaks of crossing Niagara or the Grand Canyon in the future, he is consistent with his established performer code. And his Yangtze River Skywalk conforms entirely to his pattern.

To achieve his records while insuring his own safety, Cochrane developed a pole harness which eases the weight of the heavy pole on his arms. Cochrane justifies the use of this device:

> As I started getting on in age—and I do longer and longer and longer walks and the pole weighs as much as sixty pounds— and to be able to carry that for an hour or an hour and a half is a tremendous strain. So what I did, I designed this shoulder harness that goes over my shoulders. It allows my body to carry the weight rather than just the pivot of my elbows and my forearms (Appendix A 123).

This innovation, while falling far short of such extremes as nets or life lines, clearly falls within the category of "mechanics." One can almost hear the purist Petit scoff at such an accommodation

In keeping with his circus background, his costumes are showy but chosen with care. It can be difficult to see a performer at a great distance, so for the Yangtze River Skywalk, he chose dark blue so he would stand out against the sky (Appendix A 127). The flashing rhinestone also helps an



Cochrane —a speck against the sky (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

audience track the wire walker's progress. On a practical level for the performer, the pants of the costume were belled at the bottoms and cut higher in front, lower in back so that the foot would encounter no interference as step followed step.

In setting up and executing his skywalks, Cochrane shows himself to be a supremely cautious man. While not going as far as Petit, who flatly denies the existence of risk, Cochrane takes every prudent step to minimize danger. First, he supervises all aspects of the rigging. He learned the hard way. One time when he did not personally oversee the setup, a missing bolt caused the wire to go slack and he fell ninety feet breaking "every bone in [his] body below the neck." It took four years before he was fully recovered from the accident (Wilson: Promotional video). Cochrane has formal training in engineering which adds to the safety cushion he is able to give himself and also helps in dealing with squeamish organizations and locales.

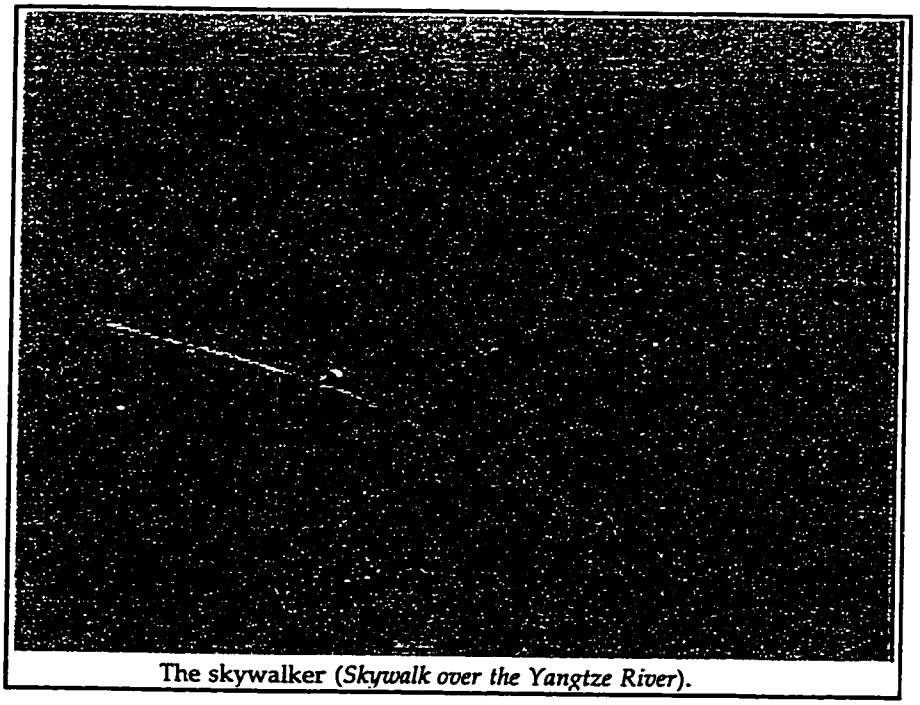
> I have a master's degree in bridge and structural engineering. So when I speak to cities and people of various organizations in cities around the world, I speak their language. I speak engineering language, I don't speak circus language (Appendix A 121).

Little needs to be said regarding the risk of falling from such a height as 1,365 feet. The only outcome is death. But how does Cochrane minimize such an eventuality? As with all wire walkers, confidence, the vital belief that one can indeed carry off an audacious crossing, is built through years of rehearsal and experience until the wire is a safe home and true danger lies elsewhere.

> I've been in much more danger going to and from an

> engagement than I ever am up on the wire. Because we have developed a craft, an art, a form, a performance and we do the same performance all the time. When we do this, we're in familiar territory (Appendix A 121).

Jay Cochrane's technique, then, for managing the risks of so adventurous a crossing as that at Qutang Gorge is to do what he has done thousands of times before. Using an enormous, heavy balance pole suspended from his shoulders, eyes locked on the wire ahead, Cochrane carves out a niche of safety in the perilous loneliness beyond the help of any human agency. The only variables he allows are those of height and distance. Having achieved 1,365 feet, height has become irrelevant and distance is a matter of the endurance age will allow.



The skywalker (*Skywalk over the Yangtze River*).

CHAPTER 6

Disaster in Detroit

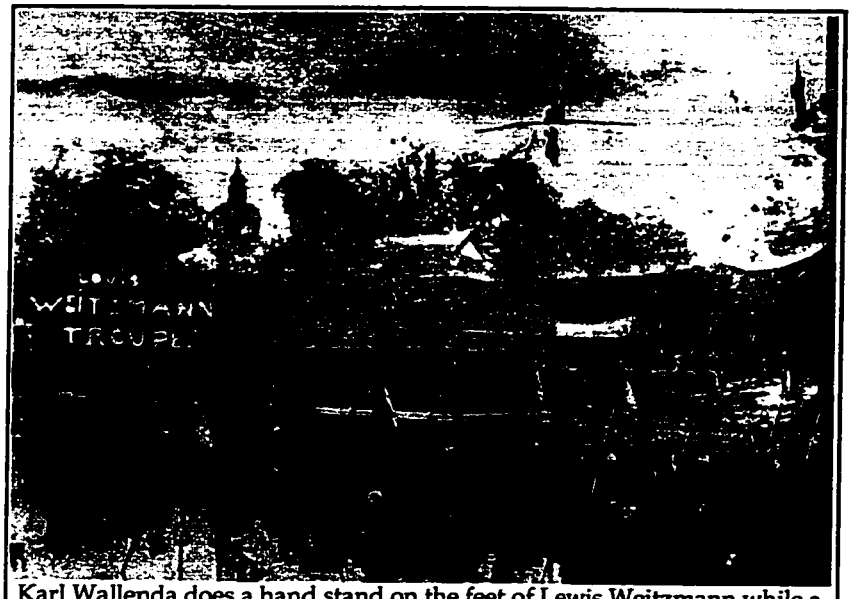
"Ich kann nicht mehr halten!"—Dieter Shepp

Innovation emerges as an important element of the developing theory of physical risk-in-performance and Karl Wallenda made his fame and fortune in the risk-filled world of the high wire by ardently developing ever more daring acts. He and his troupe always sought to be the best, the most renowned high wire walkers in the world. Coming out of the struggle and poverty of the European circus world, Wallenda knew that fame was his family's meal ticket and insurance for a continual flow of bookings. "Karl...was always scheming for ideas, for [ever] more daring stunts that would put his troupe on every billboard around the world" (Wallenda 20). The stunt that put the Wallendas at the top of the circus heap took years to develop.

The Wallendas worked as a team on the wire, performing stunts in pairs, trios, quartets, sometimes as many as eight on the slender steel cable. Karl's first major stunt, as a youth in Germany, was a hands-to-feet hand stand.

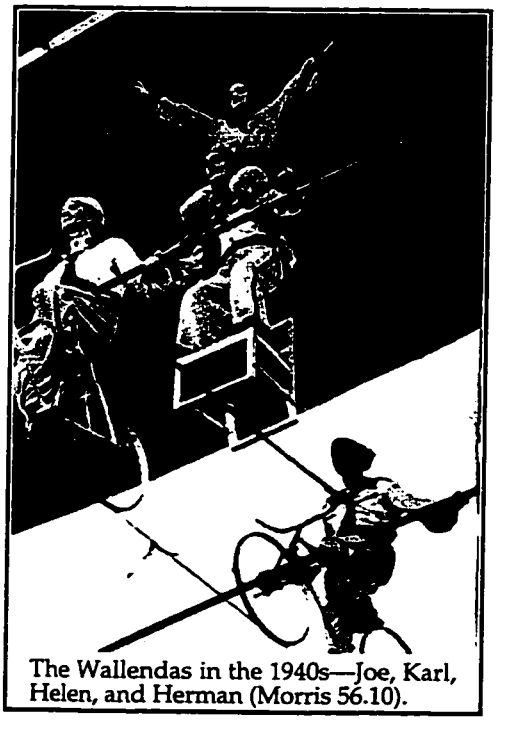
> Karl...followed Louis [Weitzmann]...without a balancing pole...Margarita came from the opposite side balcony and met them in the center [of the wire]. Louis knelt, laid his balancing pole on the wire at a right angle and placed his head at the apex where the pole and the wire met. At the same time Margarita slipped the steel hook of a wooden mouthpiece onto the wire. She lowered herself, gripped the

mouthpiece and spun from her teeth as Karl held Louis' soles and lifted himself head downwards to make the hand-to-feet stand (Morris 33).



Karl Wallenda does a hand stand on the feet of Lewis Weitzmann while a girl dangles below (Morris 56.4).

Other Wallenda family stunts involved more headstands and handstands, bicycles on the wire, chairs, and multilevel pyramids. The most daring Karl Wallenda concoction, however, and the stunt that was (and is) forever linked to their name, became known as the seven-man pyramid.


The Wallendas in the 1940s—Joe, Karl, Helen, and Herman (Morris 56.10).

"Karl's dream since 1938," the seven-man pyramid took years of arduous training to achieve (Wallenda 31). The stunt required extraordinary coordination and concentration to move the assemblage of

seven individuals across a high wire. The act amplified risk tremendously while rewarding the audience with an incomparable thrill. Bringing the pyramid act to performance with the necessary level of safety required relentless, exacting effort. Karl Wallenda, a man capable of clownish behavior socially, transformed himself in rehearsal and performance.

> Karl's spirit changed where his art was concerned. He was like a different man then, deadly serious about the high wire. He drove everyone to perfection, until each muscle and bone in their bodies ached. Their nerves and tendons were still jumping when he finally let them quit for the day to fall exhausted into sleep (Wallenda 47).

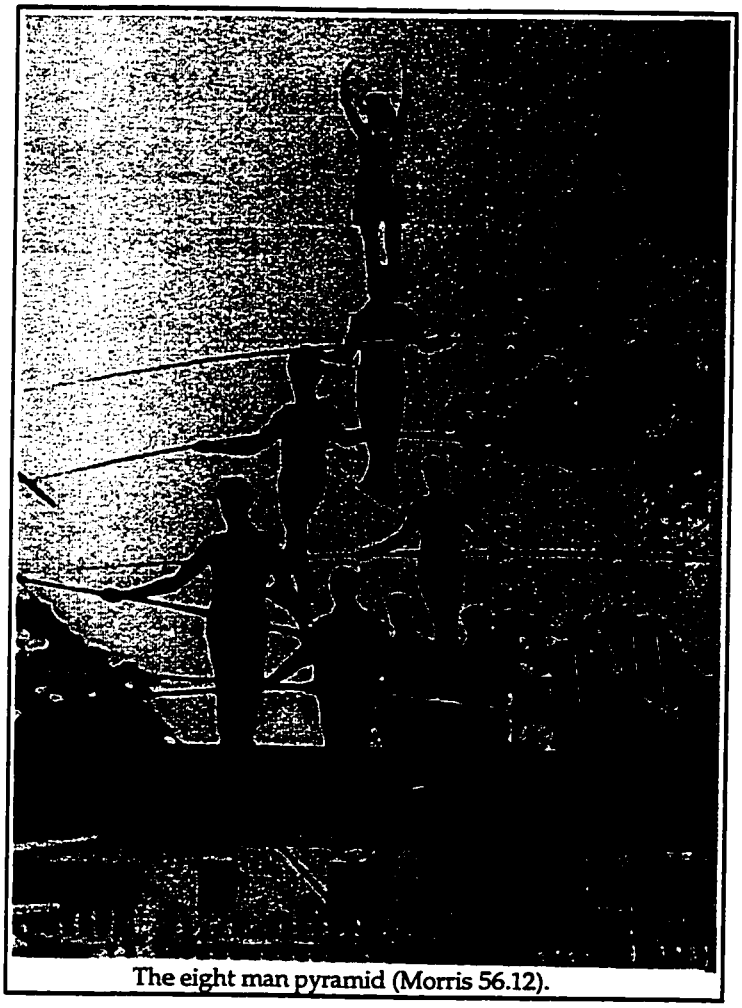
As with all such acts, the training begins on the ground and, as skill and confidence grow, height increases. Gunther Wallenda, Karl's nephew, son of his older brother Herman, recalled the process:

> The first time the seven-man pyramid was put together, it was done on the ground. We practiced it several times a day, starting a few feet off the ground, and then working our way to moving the wire higher up until we could do it 30 feet off the ground. Of course we didn't use a net, which was our trademark, and doing the seven-man pyramid without one made us more competitive and marketable (Wallenda 26).

The family was not blind to the tremendous risk involved. From the beginning, Herman opposed the concept, as did some of the Wallenda wives and mothers. However, "Karl...continued designing ways to bring to fruition his seven-man pyramid idea. His brother Herman tried to dissuade him saying it was too dangerous and no one in the family should risk it" (Wallenda 26). But the strong-willed family leader prevailed, although his

brother still resisted. "Herman ... protested, 'Karl, this is a damned dangerous trick. One person slips—the whole lot goes'"(Wallenda 32). Karl insisted it could be done. Events eventually proved both brothers correct.

After years of preparation the seven-man pyramid debuted in 1947. Eventually, the troupe became so proficient that, in rehearsal, "they managed to top themselves by building an eight-man pyramid, but the performers decided against it—too much weight" (Wallenda 33). From 1947 to 1962, "the Wallendas performed 'the seven' without anything going wrong, and no other troupe could copy them" (Wallenda 33).



The eight man pyramid (Morris 56.12).

In January of 1962, the Wallendas were scheduled to perform for the Shrine Circus in Detroit. For these performances, two new members were worked into the act—Dieter and Jana Shepp, a young brother and sister, recent emigrés from East Germany, the niece and nephew of Karl's first wife, Martha. Having had no previous wire walking experience, the two were trained and worked into the act. Dieter complained long and often about the arduousness of the work and the physical difficulty, but seemed to come along well enough to be put into "the seven" in the front position and lead "the slug," as Delilah Wallenda, Karl's grand-daughter, called the slow-moving pyramid, out onto the wire (Wallenda 76). On the night of January 30, 1962, Dieter was in the lead, considered the easiest position because of the unobstructed view of the wire, yoked to Dick Faughan, Karl Wallenda's son-in-law. Standing above them on the bar supported between their shoulders, Karl was the eyes and brain of "the slug." Following Dieter and Dick came Mario Wallenda, Karl's son, and Gunther, last—"the tail-ender, the toughest position, especially at the point when he had to sustain the full jolt of transition as he left the platform" (Morris, 163). Above them stood Herman with a bar connecting him to his brother ahead. Finally, Jana sat in a chair with a balance pole across her lap forming the apex of the pyramid.

No film record exists of the performance that night. Only blurry black and white photos visually attest to the ensuing disaster. That performance was recreated, however, in the 1977 film *The Great Wallendas* with as much fidelity as possible. That film, starring Lloyd Bridges as Karl Wallenda, was made with the technical assistance of Karl Wallenda himself. Also starring in the film were John Van Dreelen as Herman and Cathy Rigby as Jana, with

William Sadler as Dieter, Stephen Parr as Dick, Bruce Ornstein as Mario, and Ben Fuhrman as Gunther. Actually performing the "seven" were the 1977 members of the Wallenda troupe (those with asterisks are Wallenda family members):

Terry Troffer*
Enrico Bogino*
David Klukow
Delilah (Wallenda) Troffer*
Farrell Hettig, Jr.
Rietta Jordan*
Louis Murillo
Mario Bogino*
Tino Zoppé*

Realizing that time, memory, and dramatic license surely has altered the perceptions of those who were there and some details are undoubtedly inaccurate, and that, of course, no recreation can duplicate a by-gone performance, the essentials of the act are nonetheless accurately represented so far as I can determine. That recreation, then, forms the basis of the following analysis.

The Performance

Upon the announcement of their act, the Wallenda troupe bounds out into the center ring to take their bow before ascending to the wire strung 36 feet overhead and taking positions on the two-tiered platform. Because of the great difficulty of the act and the concentration required, the ringmaster calls for complete silence in the auditorium. The Wallendas are clad in showy gold lamé costumes that glitter under the the circus lights. The men's

Lloyd Bridges as Karl Wallenda (*The Great Wallendas*).

trousers are slightly belled and cut high to the ankle. Jana wears a leotard-like costume of the same material and sports a small headdress with a red feather.

With a drum roll cueing the start of the act, Karl shouts out, "Dieter, go!" Dieter appears nervous and, holding tightly to his balance pole, takes three shaky steps out on the wire and stops while the front harness of the standing pole is slipped over his shoulders. Mario, still standing on the lower platform (and in a different position than history records) slips on the rear harness, yoking himself to Dieter. Karl steps from the upper platform and takes his position on the standing pole and Herman slips the front harness of the upper standing pole over his shoulders. At Mario's command, "Go," the front three move out onto the wire followed by Dick in the number three spot on the wire and stop. Gunther, in the tail-end position, attaches the rear standing pole, first to Dick, then to himself. Herman mounts the rear

standing pole and the whole assemblage holds while Jana takes her position at the top of the pyramid. Another member of the troupe moves the chair in behind her and slowly and carefully she sits with the balance pole across her lap. With all the balance poles gently swaying, the pyramid looks like a horizontal forest of thin, leafless trees. When Jana calls out, "Ready," Gunther gives the "famous words associated with the Wallendas' performance," the command, "Easy Out" (Morris 76). The "slug" is in motion.

The "slug" (*The Great Wallendas*).

All eyes are focused downward as the bottom quartet of walkers step steadily in unison as Karl quietly directs, "Push a little. Keep that step. Fine. Fine. Push a little in the back. Push...push a little. That's it." The camera shows the strain of effort and concentration producing sweat, first on Karl's face, then on Mario's. The only sounds audible are the rustle of costumes and the eerie creaks and pops of the wire. Finally at the center of the 49 foot span,

Karl calls out, "Watch it. Stop."

Jana balances on her chair (*The Great Wallendas*).

As Karl says, "Good balance, good, Jana," the teenager tentatively finds the rungs of the chair with her slippered feet and presses herself upward. She sits briefly on the back of the chair, then places her feet on the seat and with infinite slowness lifts to a full standing position. With Karl encouraging her, "Take your time," Jana retraces her movements and once again sits on the chair. She calls out, "Ready." Karl utters the command, "Go."

Close to finishing, a few feet from the platform, Karl softly encourages the troupe with "Keep that step" and "Fine, fine." The film shows each member of the troupe serious and concentrating before the camera finally dwells on Dieter whose face begins to show increasing tension. Suddenly, Dieter, sweating and grimacing, struggles to maintain himself. Karl calls down from above, "Dieter, your pole." The youth's balance pole starts to sway wildly up and down and Dieter momentarily tosses it in the air to get a better

grip. Struggling and panic stricken, he suddenly shouts, "Ich kann nicht mehr halten!" ("I cannot hold it any longer.") As the crowd screams, the pyramid dissolves like a house of cards.

Dieter starts to fall (*The Great Wallendas*).

Dieter falls first, pitching forward off the wire pulling Mario down with him. Karl, above, falls to the wire, the steel cable slicing into his thigh as his foot catches in a guy wire. He quickly takes hold of the wire with his hands. Jana tumbles from the chair above. Poles clatter to the ground as Dick Faughan falls next. The camera first shows the three men falling back first or head first, uncontrolled and awkward, landing in ways that can only mean death or the severest of injuries.

As Jana falls she grabs onto Karl and clings to him in desperation. Herman, pulled down with Karl, snags the wire with his hands as he falls and swings there with his arms extended. Of all the wire walkers, only Gunther, the tail-end man, remains standing on the wire with his pole. Gunther

Jana clings to Karl. Herman grasps the wire as Gunther moves in to help (*The Great Wallendas*).

moves in toward Karl and Jana, carefully stepping over his father's hands. Gunther kneels, his pole perpendicular to the wire and lays down to reach a hand to Jana. Meanwhile, below, circus people hastily stretch a furniture pad

Karl and Gunther position Jana for the net (*The Great Wallendas*).

into an improvised safety net to catch the girl when she falls. Suspended by Karl and Gunther, Jana sees that they intend to let her fall and screams, pleading not to be dropped. Gunther tells her to land in a sitting position, not on her feet and she will be all right. When they release her, she does hit feet first and rebounds out of the blanket, striking her head on the hard floor. Gunther rises and continues to the platform. His injured uncle inches his way to safety as his father follows hand over hand.

Dieter and Dick die in the hospital within hours. Mario has a fractured skull and is in a coma with injuries that will confine him to a wheel chair for the rest of his life. Jana receives only minor injuries and is released from the hospital the next day. She will never again walk the wire. Besides the sliced thigh, Karl Wallenda also sustains a double hernia and a cracked pelvis (Morris 166; Wallenda 86).

Dieter, Dick , and Mario lie dead or dying as circus people scramble to help (*The Great Wallendas*).

Analysis

The Wallendas lived (and died) as circus people performing several shows a day to provide thrills for their audience. They worked without a net, primarily to ratchet up the tension and mesmerize the audience which in turn increased the demand for their act. But, also,

> Karl believed nets gave the wire walkers false confidence and often resulted in more serious injuries because the high wire aerialists bounced out as soon as they hit. Some claimed, though, that Karl did these things so his acts would be even more exciting (Wallenda 193).

Whether in a tent or an auditorium, the venue and the set up were essentially the same—the same equipment set up at the same height and distance. Wind and weather, of course, played no part in circus crossings like the one in Detroit.

The act existed in a timeless realm outside the movement of national or international social or political events. The wire was the same as it had been for decades, rigged in the same manner. The stunts presented were the same or variants of tested acts. Certainly, the seven-man pyramid had been performed for 15 years without incident. In this particular instance, on the evening of January 30, 1962, external factors played no part.

But what of the internal dynamics? Available sources are united in fingering young Dieter Shepp as the cause of the fall. This may or may not be just since Dieter cannot speak for himself. Certainly the perception remains that he was the wrong man at the wrong time. New to wire walking, new to America, perhaps with a personality unsuited to the rigors of the work, Dieter was under a terrific strain. Descriptions of his training dwell on his oft

repeated physical complaints of exhaustion and sore muscles. The night of the Detroit walk, he had added stress.

> Dieter was dealing with problems of his own. A head cold coupled with complete exhaustion had him down. Not only was he tired from the rigors of the act, he was also moonlighting as a prop man in order to make more money (Wallenda 73).

Dieter was uncomfortable with the work from the beginning. Delilah Wallenda wrote of how "he was shaky on the wire" and "he didn't look like a wire walker." Yet Karl didn't see it that way. He was overly optimistic, maintaining that he "broke Dieter in good" and that "the boy has no fears and holds like a rock" (Wallenda 66-68). Karl Wallenda believed in family above all else. If his love of family moved him to try to give his newly arrived relatives from Germany a living in America and incorporate them into a tremendously difficult act, then surely responsibility for that decision must rest with Karl and some of the blame for the disaster must reside there as well.

Karl Wallenda believed in the strength of his own will. It was he who conceived "the seven" and despite opposition within the family, brought it to performance. He also ignored the clear signs, apparent to others, that Dieter was unsuited to the wire. How much of that evaluation is the 20/20 vision of hindsight, no one can tell. Surely the backward view clarifies understanding. Delilah Wallenda recalled, "What I remember most about these practices is how everyone in the family kept telling Dieter not to throw his pole in the air because he might not catch it" (Wallenda 64). A strong will, often an asset, can upon occasion lead a person to ignore clear warnings of impending

disaster. In an interview a few years before his death in Puerto Rico, Karl Wallenda said, "I want to have control over a situation. If I die, I want it to be my fault" (Wallenda 191). Indeed, willfulness plus fatalism is an equation that for Wallenda twice equaled death.

The degree of risk for wire walkers increases geometrically with each added variable. Jay Cochrane limits his variables to length and height. Philippe Petit adds theme, music, and narrative to the basic act of walking the wire, placing it in contexts hitherto unthought of. For the Wallendas and wire walkers like them who work in partnership, each added team member increases the possibility of life threatening error. Only continual, exhaustive training and rehearsal can create the unity of mind, body, and purpose that ensures the necessary degree of safety. And still, a moment of inattention can destroy the most careful preparation. Yet it is the potential for disaster that attracts and holds the audience. A human pyramid on the floor can be interesting. Raised 36 feet above a concrete floor and set in motion across a slender steel cable, it becomes riveting. And it is danger that makes it so.

With danger comes fear. Fear of falling is a primal fear, one to be controlled, not eliminated. In dealing with fear, wire walkers must play a psychological game with themselves. They must dwell in a paradox wherein they both fear and deny fear. In dealing with his own fears over a long career, Karl Wallenda spoke of the performer's paradox:

> Yes, sometimes [I get afraid] on the night before. Once I have taken the first step onto the wire, I am thinking of only getting to the other side...then when I have walked the wire, I have two strong martinis and I forget it. What matters is whether you *need* to walk the wire. You must be

> a little afraid, and you must want to prove that you are not afraid (Wallenda 191).

There is another tool for dealing with fear in performance. There is always some fear in any performance whether in the physically risky world of the high wire or in some other area of performance where fear might be caused by emotional risk, risk of embarrassment, or any of a myriad of perceived dangers. Fatalism, *que sera, sera,* letting go, surrendering to a higher power, "trust yourself"— all are terms for putting fear-bred self consciousness aside. Herman Wallenda spoke to the issue of fear, fatalism, and paradox:

> Certainly we're afraid, but you must always feel safe up there. If you don't feel afraid, then, either you're a fool or you haven't got enough experience. You don't want anyone up there who is not afraid. It's not over until [we reach the platform]. The possibility of [an] accident exists in our minds and we accept the fact...We all know our time will come...We live with the philosophy of predestination...He [God] knows when, where, and how you come and when, where, and how you go...I've never had a premonition that kept me from going up. If I ever do, then I'm out of show business (Wallenda 69).

Such a notion of putting oneself in the hands of God and letting Him have the responsibility serves as method of managing fear. The idea of surrendering to a higher power is not unique to wire walkers or the unsophisticated. When searching for a way to hit high notes, a singer in training may hear a teacher intone, "Let go; let God." A musician, a violinist, for example, cannot possibly think of what his hands need to do to play each note in an arpeggio. He must put crippling self awareness aside and trust his

physical intelligence, brought to performance level by training and rehearsal, to do the job. In the theatre, we call such self awareness stage fright. Stage fright, however, seldom leads to death.

What caused Dieter Shepp to lose control of his balance pole will never be known. Was it fear brought on by self consciousness leading to a lapse in concentration? Was it simple fatigue brought about by a head cold coming on, travel, and over work? Did his palms start to sweat? All we know is what he said: "Ich kann nicht mehr halten!"

CHAPTER 7

First Steps on the Wire

"You won't get results from a few hours of serious work. You must continue until your flesh understands it" — Philippe Petit

The wire awaits (author's personal photo).

One can study and study an action, probe as deeply as observation, reason, and intuition will allow, there will still remain a level of knowledge that eludes the seeker. One cannot gain any skill and the knowledge that goes with it without actually doing whatever action is the target of study. Reading, writing, thinking about acting, welding, or wire walking will not transform a person into an actor, welder or funambulist. This is the sense and source of Petit's comment that "study of the high wire is not rigorous, it is useless" (Petit 9). He is right. Some knowledge is obtained only experientially. Furthermore, knowledge resides not only in the intellect, but also, and sometimes more importantly, in the body. Such knowledge is not to be

discounted. Intellectual knowledge that lords it over physical knowledge is often handed its comeuppance when the body demonstrates its superiority in action.

Throughout my son's Little League career, I have taken him to the local batting cage and watched and coached as he learned to bat. At the age of 6, the pitching machine served him balls at 40 miles-per-hour and he chopped and lurched at them, sometimes connecting, but most often not. I would stand outside and shout out "Level swing!" or "Keep your eye on the ball!" or "Step into it!" A three-time all-star when he completed his final season at the age of 12, he was hitting 70 mile-an-hour fast balls with 90 per cent accuracy. Still, there I was outside the cage shouting instructions. One day, when he was taking a break from hitting, I put on a batting helmet and slipped into the cage to take a round of 30 pitches. Affecting a scowling game face, I waggled my bat ferociously and waited for the green light and the incoming pitch. Whizz, thunk... oof! The ball got by me. I had swung too late. Next pitch, too early. Next pitch, too low. On and on it went, pitch after pitch and I could not hit a single one. It was then I realized that my son knew more about hitting a baseball than I ever knew or ever would know. I no longer had the skill or experience to help him with his batting. Intellectual observation would not suffice. Physical knowledge, muscle intelligence demonstrated its superiority.

Physical ability, like mental ability, depends on inherited gifts and available nurturing. Through hard work, meager gifts can be maximized to obtain superior results. Fabulous gifts can lay fallow, neglected and unrealized. Often one must engage in an activity to discover the range of

one's particular talent. So, in an effort to uncover some of the secrets of wire walking, and what gifts I might possess, I resolved that, as part of this thesis, I would undertake to train myself to walk the tight rope. I had a goal of walking a cable hung a relatively modest (so I thought) six feet off the ground at a distance of thirty feet. This would be sufficient risk for a fifty year-old married man with three children. The worst that could happen would be broken bones. After all, I would not try at that height without the full confidence that I could do so with the requisite modicum of safety. I would need to deny that I take a risk.

My research showed me that I would have to start modestly, so I devised a method of training myself that I thought would work quite well. I purchased three lengths of 3/4 inch galvanized steel pipe, joined them with tee couplings, attached 12 inch legs, and 10 inch outriggers at either end of the span. I welded the legs to 3/8 inch steel plates for added stability. I now had a

The practice pipe (author's personal photo).

21-foot walk a foot off the ground, enough to give practice in balance and control. I figured a few weeks of practice at, say, a half hour a day, would give me more than enough experience to walk a wire.

When I assembled my practice pipe, I was terrifically excited and tried it out immediately. Immediately, I fell off. I have been a carpenter and have often "walked the plate," the narrow edge at the top of a newly framed wall, at a height of eight, ten, or, twelve feet. The narrowness of 3/4 inch pipe, however, requires a different order of balance. Again and again I mounted my pipe, staying on longer each time until, after perhaps thirty attempts, I crossed all the way. I was triumphant, exhilarated. The feeling was intense and satisfying. Such an accomplishment! I turned around to cross back and immediately fell off. I worked for an hour until I had crossed ten times without falling. Now I was getting somewhere. I stopped for the day, surprised that I was soaked through with sweat. Had I been working that hard? I was just walking and balancing. I am a runner, used to putting in miles a day. That should produce sweat, not this. The intensity of the effort, mental as well as physical, had apparently raised my metabolic rate enough so that the cooling system kicked in.

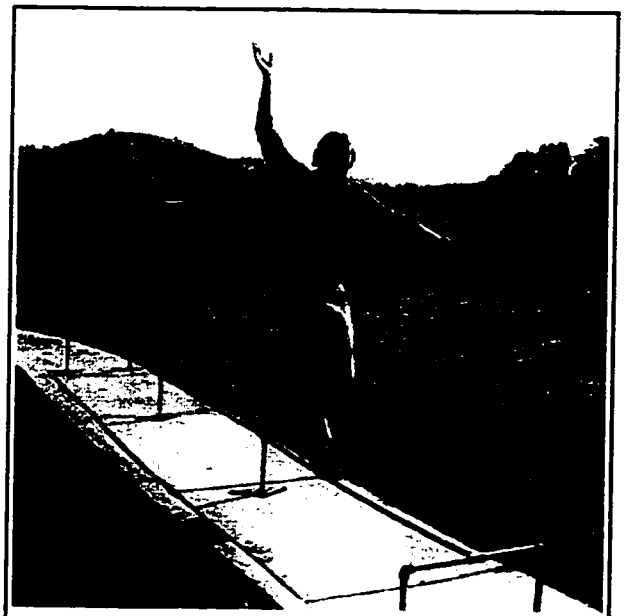
The next day I was back at it. This time I managed to cross 22 times including a run of six in a row. I sweated less. I was buoyant. I really could do this. I set another goal. If I could cross the pipe with a 99 % success rate, then I would be ready for the wire. If I was at approximately 20 % in two days, then surely in two weeks I would be ready. I needed to be ready. The thesis must be finished and this important element could not be missing.

Day after day I spent time on the pipe. Some days I could just walk up,

step on and cross nonchalantly. Other days, it seemed my center of balance was left home in bed. I would not stop, however, until I had crossed at least twice without falling off. As I worked, I kept thinking about Petit's admonition:

> ...the high wire is not what you think it is.
> It is not a realm of lightness, space, and smiles.
> It is a job.
> Grim, tough, deceptive (Petit 9).

Indeed, the first flush of exhilaration subsided to mere satisfaction after each successful crossing. Yes, the work is grim in the determination required to get back on again and again and again. It is tough to hold mind and body to the task. Deceptive? Yes. But the deceit lies not in the pipe or the wire, but in oneself. Why can a crossing be made easily one time but not another, when the conditions are exactly the same? What inner resources are necessary to hold mind and body concentrated in the effort? What causes a walker to lose his balance?



Walking the pipe (author's personal photo).

As I practiced, this activity began to teach me what I needed to know. As I learned, I started to see that the lessons applied in a much broader way than just the narrow realm of pipe or cable. The first lesson was this: do whatever it takes to stay on the pipe. The second came hard upon the first: *allow* your body to do what it needs to do to stay on the pipe. That means if it takes flailing around with your arms to keep balance, flail away. If you must stick a leg out far to the side to regain a slipping balance, do so. If you must flail and flap, first one leg out, then the other, looking like a complete idiot, then that is what must be done. Perhaps grace and poise will come later. But at all costs, stay on the pipe! That realization allowed me to free my arms. I let them float at my sides or over my head, making the necessary adjustments. Now my crossings became more consistent. Some days I was at 50 %.

And so by experience I came to the obvious lesson, one that applies to all fields of performance. To do this activity one must be truly concentrated with mind and body unified. This means that you cannot *think about* what you are doing *while you are doing it*. The critical, self-conscious part of a person must be turned off. All young actors are taught that you cannot watch yourself act and still be in the scene. That kind of detachment will lead to dull theatre and in a high wire walker will lead to death. A Little Leaguer cannot think about hitting the ball, he has to hit the ball. The wire walker cannot think about walking the wire, he must do it. As I said, obvious, but not so easy to do. I am sure that I am no different than most people who do many tasks while thinking about something else. Driving comes to mind, or washing dishes. Performance has more intense requirements. I was in the

original company of the Broadway show *Shenandoah*, which played for two years and then went out on national tour. I was with the show the entire time and even did a touring summer stock production. I figure I have performed in that show 1200 times. There were occasions when, in front of a full house, my mind would drift and I would think about what I was going to do after the show or about an upcoming audition. I would have to wrench my concentration back and focus, breathing and listening to regain the moment and slip back into the scene. I don't believe such situations would be desirable half way across a 2,000-foot wire 1,365 feet above the ground.

And so, I started to learn a more intense form of concentration, letting go of the intellect and letting the physical take control. The implications were tremendous for me as a performer. Exhortations from past teachers resurfaced. I remember one in particular. As a young actor at the American Conservatory Theatre, I was taking an acting class from Alan Fletcher. My partner and I were working on a scene from *A Man For All Seasons*. Part way through the scene, Fletcher stopped us and with jaws chewing furiously, snapping the gum that kept him from smoking, he shouted, "Stop mind-fucking it, Paul. Just do it." I stopped stunned. I had not realized that I was not involved in the scene. I had been merely walking and talking and that was not sufficient. Over the years, as I gained skill as an actor, I learned what Fletcher meant and found ways to deal with my intellectual detachment. As I crossed my practice pipe again and again, Fletcher's voice came back to me, "Don't mind-fuck it, Paul. Just do it."

After three weeks of practice and facing thesis deadlines, I decided I needed to move on to walking the wire. I bought 25 feet of 3/4 inch wire rope

fabricated with a loop at each end. I also bought a two-ton "come-along" to tighten the cable. I found a park-like setting at the school where I teach and, using chains to attach my equipment to some trees, stretched the wire at a height of about two feet between two oaks, applying as much tension as I could to gain the necessary tautness. I jumped up on the wire and held on to an over-hanging branch. I tried a step or two and the wire quivered wildly throwing me off. I tried repeatedly and was only able to walk at most three steps before being deposited to the ground. The last time I tried, I clutched at the nearby branch which promptly broke loose in my hands. I tumbled uncontrolled to the ground. So, borrowing some wire from the metal shop, I stabilized the cable by attaching guy wires looped tightly over the cable and attached to steel stakes driven into the ground. With my wife, Sylvia, acting as photographer for my performance, I was as ready as I was going to be.

November 20, 1997 was partly cloudy and comfortably cool. El Niño had brought rains and even though it hadn't rained in several days, the ground was damp and a little muddy. I rejected the notion of an audience and those attendant pressures, and so determined to perform only for myself, my wife, and the camera. I wore comfortable old faded jeans, a purple turtleneck sweater, and the deck shoes in which I been practicing. I had sometimes practiced walking my pipe in stocking feet, but because of the damp earth, put that idea aside on the day of performance.

To get ready for the cable, I spent some time warming up on the pipe. I crossed perhaps a dozen times, falling off four or five times. Not the best augury. Not entirely satisfied with my efforts, I nonetheless decided to press on. We shifted to the site of the cable.

Using a ladder to mount the cable, I stand on the wire for a moment before trying to cross. Arms out for balance, I begin across. Stabilized, the wire is much more steady, but as I approach the middle of the wire, it starts to vibrate and I can see that my weight has depressed the cable and loosened the guy wires. The old saying goes, "Live and learn." I think for a wire walker it might be more appropriate to say, "Learn and live." So, I ask my wife to sit on the wire while I recinch the guy lines.

Walking the wire. Source (Author's personal photo).

Back on the wire, I start to cross once more. The wire feels better, but still radically unlike my practice pipe. The wire has a different kind of movement—it moves laterally, even with guy lines, and it flexes up and down with the my weight. The confusing feeling causes me to lose my balance and I jump off. I do not want to fall uncontrolled. I go back to the beginning several times to try again. As I had on the pipe, I do whatever I can

to stay aloft, arms and legs seeking balance. On each attempt, I cross a little further. I'm getting it. Finally, I cross the distance. I feel the old exhilaration of triumph. I go back and repeat the crossing to make sure it isn't just a fluke. Satisfied with two successful crossings in a row, I stop, disassemble my equipment and call it a day.

Analysis

I failed to achieve my original goal. I had visualized myself crossing the wire at a height of six feet holding a balance pole, gliding like Philippe Petit's Man in White. Such elegance, however, requires years of intense work not a few weeks at a half hour a day. My practice on the pipe showed me my goals were unrealistic. As I trained, I mentally lowered the cable from six feet to three. The practice pipe taught me yet another obvious lesson—the risks are real. During the second week of training, I injured myself. While struggling to stay on the pipe with whatever gyrations my body could conceive, I threw a leg out in a particularly awkward way and severely pulled the inner thigh muscle of the standing leg. It started to cramp immediately and I was hobbled for days. I still tried to cross the pipe anyway, injured or not, and thereby caused my first uncontrolled fall. I hit the concrete hard, bruising my hip and skinning a knee. Realization: one can be hurt in a one foot fall. Why not? One can drown in a puddle of water. When I finally set up my cable, it was at two feet. Humility and prudence warred with pride and won: a height of six feet would have been ridiculous for a walker of my puny skills. Experience, knowledge, and circumstances dictated a revised goal tailored to my abilities and likely outcome.

Of course, in all this I was dealing with risk. What level of risk was I willing to dare? Not much. And that is as it should be. Like Petit, I wanted to be able to say, "I take no risk." To do that, I had to evaluate my progress. I had no doubt that I would fall, not once but many times. A fall from six feet I could perhaps control and emerge unscathed or sustain a sprained ankle. I could also fall in such a way as to break my neck. What would such a performance be worth? Certainly not my life. How high was Christopher Reeve when his horse threw him to the ground breaking his neck? Risk management in my case meant lowering the wire. The time when one can face the wire expecting to cross safely rather than expecting to fall is the time to increase the height.

What emerges from my experiment with the wire? In performance, in order to do an act perceived as risky, one must have the skill to bring it off. Such skill is acquired through training and rehearsal. Beginners cannot take the same risks that a seasoned veteran might. One does not put the average first year band student on the stage of Carnegie Hall before a full house and expect him to perform like Isaac Stern. Similarly one does not put a beginner on the high wire. There are no worthy aesthetics to such risk. For a performer who expects to live to perform another day, risk must be brought to as near zero as possible.

Although not achieving quite what I set out to do, I must still count the effort a success, for by making the efforts, I gained insight into the skill of wire walking. I may not have stepped into the room, but I did crack open the door and sniff the atmosphere. I do know that I will leave my pipe set up and my cable awaits another occasion.

CHAPTER 8

Joy and the Consequences of Failure

"Out of this nettle, danger, we have plucked this flower safety."
Shakespeare (Henry IV, pt. 1)

Although Philippe Petit refuses to admit to risk and says instead that his act is framed in danger, this metaphor cannot completely explain the role risk plays in performance. A close analysis of this bit of poetry, however, leads to the inescapable conclusion that danger (risk) is an *integral* aesthetic element of performance. Risk is an idea, an imaginative construct. Like all thought, it is intangible. The only physical manifestation of this concept occurs in the sweat and chemicals that the emotional response to risk such as fear or exhilaration produces in human beings. Risk disappears when either the period of peril ends or the feared trauma occurs.

Can any other abstract idea, in and of itself, be shaped to serve artistic purposes? Can the idea of liberty, for example, be controlled to evoke emotional response? Are there mechanisms to shape and control liberty for the purposes of art? It would not appear so. Risk is not an emotion like fear or joy but a situational assessment of the consequences of failure. However, emotional response flows from this assessment which is the first step in shaping and controlling the degree of risk. The determiners of the degree of risk are duration and the nature of damage likely as a result of failure.

The perceptions of those who experience performances are controlled first by the artists. The initial stimulus, that which is seen, heard, and felt, smelled or tasted, is put before an audience. Then the perceiver constructs

meaning depending on the schema that he or she brings to the experience. The performer of a risky act shapes the degree of risk undertaken by manipulating circumstances and content and so it may be legitimately concluded that risk in all its guises exists as an aesthetic element of performance. This is particularly true of physical risk.

But what of Petit's contention that risk is not an integral element of his act, but rather a frame? One thinks of a frame as something that bounds and defines a work of art. Wood or metal, plain or rococo, the frame of a painting affects the visual presentation and to some degree determines the meaning a viewer constructs. A frame may be a complimentary afterthought or part of an artwork's design. Or the frame may be missing entirely, the artist choosing instead to surround his work with blank wall, architecture, or juxtaposition relative to other works in an exhibition. These decisions are often left to others. But whatever the nature of the frame, it is a thing separate from the work of art; it may be removed. Moreover, it is static.

Performance, on the hand, is a temporal art and risk is dynamic. Risk exists in time. Once a performance is over, the danger is gone; it has no independent existence. Mary Douglas indicates this when she says, "Risk depends on time-span" (18). As pointed out above, duration is one determiner of the degree of risk. The other determiner of degree of risk that shapes an audience's perception is the imagined consequences of failure. Falling from a piece of galvanized pipe a foot off the ground is a failure that produces little of physical consequence, although it can be embarrassing if one has boasted beforehand. A fall from 1,365 feet, however, will result in death. Between these two extremes there lie an infinite number of possible

traumas—an increasing number of broken bones, paralysis, coma, disfigurement, shattered nerves, severed limbs, blindness—the catalog is endless. All these potentialities exist in the imaginations of the audience, helped along by the choices of the performer. With each difficulty layered on by chosen embellishments, the tension of the audience and the resultant emotional response increases. If a wire walker pretends to lose control or sways drunkenly, he is shaping the perceived risk to thrill the audience. If a physically diminished wire walker bullheadedly decides to make a crossing in a strong, gusty wind, he has made an artistic decision that increases the perception of risk. Once he falls, however, Apter's trauma zone engulfs both performer and audience.

Although the course of many events can be predicted with great accuracy, it cannot be done completely so. The joy of live performance is the variable, the spontaneous, the unexpected, the unanticipated. So there is risk in all performance and it cannot be removed or reduced to zero. A Broadway show can be plunged into darkness by power failure. Miscued stagehands can cause a set to come crashing down. Lines can be forgotten in the middle of a song on opening night. A hand can be sliced open during a carefully rehearsed sword fight. A crazed audience member can bring a show grinding to a halt. All these things (and much, much more) have happened to this author. Every performer will have similar stories. But these incidents are the result of accident or happenstance, not artistic choice. The risk in high wire (or other dangerous performances) exists by artistic choice and cannot be deconstructed. It can, however, be shaped and controlled and that which falls under the control of an artist becomes an aesthetic element. Risk for the wire

walker is just as much an aesthetic consideration as pitch, tone, and rhythm are for the musician or plot, character, and theme are for the playwright.

Having established risk as an aesthetic element of performance, attention now must be directed to the shaping and controlling of this factor. The first consideration in risk assumption is analysis and evaluation. Can the performance be done? Should it be done? These questions are not asked in fixed hierarchical order and the answers to these questions depend on the project. Something that has been done can be done. The inherent risks are known. Something new, however, must be carefully evaluated. A high wire crossing of the Grand Canyon at a distance of one mile is possible and can be attempted with reasonable expectations of success. Jumping across the Snake River Canyon on a motorcycle, even a rocket propelled one, had little chance of success and indeed, Evel Knievel's attempt fizzled after a few hundred feet. The question of should a project be done is much more subjective and depends on many factors. For an artist such as Petit, the answer might depend on whether such an act would serve his artistic ends. For Cochrane, the novelty of the never-before-attempted might suffice. A fat paycheck at the end of the day would lure many performers to court danger regardless of the potential success. One suspects Knievel was far more interested in money than achievement. If a risky performance is part of a larger work, a play, say, then questions of whether such an act would enhance the work by reinforcing theme, plot, character, or meaning take on more importance. For example, Jim Dale walked a tightrope in the Broadway show *Barnum*, an entirely fitting choice for a show based on that consummate showman. And the thought of Hamlet delivering "To be, or not to be..." while walking a

tightrope, with each line's feminine ending indicating a moment of unbalance, is frankly intriguing.

In ascertaining the reasonableness and rightness of performing a given dangerous act, the venue is paramount and inextricably bound to the analysis and evaluation. When Philippe Petit saw the twin towers of the World Trade Center, he knew immediately that a crossing both should and could be done. He also knew he could not get permission to do it. He decided not to let a legal scruple like trespass bar him from such a feat. Part of "can it be done," then, is not in the actual performance but in getting access to it. Because of the engineering aspects and public visibility, a clandestine crossing of Niagara Falls would seem to be impossible. The preparations would have to be extensive and time consuming. The only bar to "can it be done" in that situation resides in the nations and municipalities on either end of the wire. Performance-wise, it has been done many times before, just not in this century.

For Jay Cochrane in China, the venue was inspected and found possible and access was a given. Actually accomplishing the feat of traversing Qutang Gorge then became a job of rigging the wire to the required level of safety. He knew that given good weather and proper engineering, he had the physical ability to sustain the crossing.

Having determined that an act can and should be done, the next element in shaping risk lies in plotting what embellishments should be included or excluded. In the film *Saltimbanco*, a remarkable high wire walker with Cirque du Soleil executed an astonishing feat by flipping backward from a higher wire to a lower one, then returning to the higher

wire by reversing the procedure with a forward flip. Where did the level of confidence needed to accomplish this display of bodily virtuosity come from? Augmenting her obvious skill and experience, the artist had the security of a nearly invisible safety line attached to her waist so her life would be preserved if she failed. She knew she would not die, a most comforting thought when attempting something so perilous.

When asked if such a feat could be performed without the safety line, Philippe Petit recoiled at the thought. "No, no...she will kill herself one day and that will be the end of her. She would not even attempt those without the mechanics because she might lose her life" (Appendix B 153). Such a risk, for Petit, is too great and so would not be considered. Somersaults on the wire however may be done because they are part of his repertoire and so, while certainly more difficult than a simple crossing, it is a level of risk that may be assumed.

Both Philippe Petit and Jay Cochrane insist that they take no risk and indeed are safer on the wire than they are crossing the street. In preparing to perform, then, a crucial component is the ability to *deny* that risk is present. This deniability comes from what Apter calls the "confidence frame" in which "the individual feels confident that he or she will avoid trauma, despite an awareness if the immediate presence of danger" (71). Those who are stupid, stubborn, or ignorant may deny risk and perhaps live to tell the tale, but the outcome is wildly unpredictable and depends on chance rather than skill. The wire walker will protect himself in confidence and deny risk based on years of experience, sure and certain personal supervision of the rigging, and on-site judgment of conditions. If conditions are not right, the

wire walker can and should abort the performance. If he does not, as Karl Wallenda found out at least twice, disaster becomes an increasing likelihood.

In learning a skill, any skill, one starts with simple actions and moves incrementally to the more complex. Some elements of complexity for wire walkers or other performers of dangerous acts, are the ramifications of risk, the consequences of failure. Wire walkers start low to the ground and raise the height as skill and confidence increases. In my own attempts at learning the skill, I started at one foot and raised the stakes to two feet, having determined that the original goal of six feet was too dangerous for one of such limited ability. Attempting to reconstruct the seven-man pyramid after the Detroit disaster, the Wallendas practiced on a wire about 12 feet off the ground. Even at that relatively low height a fall in rehearsal caused severe injuries in the troupe (Morris 173). It takes years of practice to attain the virtuosity needed to perform at great heights or to do dangerous tricks at a lower height.

Once a skill level has been reached that assures safety, which for a wire walker means rarely, if ever, falling, then height can increase. If a new stunt is incorporated into the act, it must be practiced first low, then high. This is analogous to the creation of stage combat. A fight is blocked, then rehearsed slowly, "by the numbers," again and again until the fight transcends thought. Then the speed can be raised to the level that a play demands. Finally, after the fight is fully up to speed, the emotional playing of the scene brings life and meaning to the action.

In the performance of dangerous acts, there is absolutely no room for hesitancy or self doubt. One must believe unquestionably in one's ability to

succeed. Anything less than full self confidence means that some part of the performer's concentration is considering failure and its consequences. In an activity as starkly Apollonian as wire walking, with life on the line and death waiting with each step, a stray thought, a faltering of will, could prove fatal.

Once a work of art is displayed it becomes the intellectual property of the perceiver (or audience), available for him or her to construct whatever meaning schema will allow. The aesthetic elements of a performance will attract or repel the audience, rivet them or bore them. What makes a performance watchable? What is it that compels an audience's interest? What puts an audience in what Michael Apter calls the "high arousal" state? Performances that include sex, violence, danger (in comedy, character discomfort), or demonstrations of unusual skill have the potential to rivet attention depending on the many variables involved, but what is the mechanism by which this arousal occurs? The answer lies in the roots of drama and the ancient Greek word *empathy*. An audience member must be drawn into making emotional connection with the performer to some degree and sharing the character's experiences. Apter uses similar language: "In order to gain arousal, [the spectator] must normally empathize with the action, and identify with one or another of the protagonists" (Apter 61). The spectator identifies with the performer to such a degree that he or she loses oneself in the action of the performance. The success or failure of a given performance can be measured by the level of this transporting loss of selfhood. Apter calls this

> *self-substitution* since what one is doing is putting someone else, to act as a surrogate for oneself, on the hot seat. Or—which comes to the same thing—one is temporarily

> losing one's own feelings of selfhood and allowing them to be taken over by another (Apter 61).

It is this identification that makes one weep at tragedy, laugh at comedy, or physically respond to projected images of a fight. This imaginative leap, this intangible link to a performer intensifies when the audience perceives real danger and the risk therein. Risk, then, contributes to the high arousal state and whether this emotional state is pleasant or unpleasant, whether it produces excitement or anxiety (see chart on page 16) depends on the outcome of the act. If the matador stands with slippered feet rooted, executing *veronicas* with horns brushing his elaborate costume, the audience experiences exhilaration at the cheating of death. If he is gored, it convulses in anguish. If the horns are blunted or tipped, the excitement diminishes. Similarly, if the high wire artist dares death protected only by his skill, his pole, and his confidence, the excitement is much more thrilling than if he protects himself from the abyss with nets, safety lines, or other mechanics. Since risk is integral to the act, the risk itself becomes an aesthetic element that is not a constant, but rather an artistic variable that can enhance or diminish the beauty and meaning of the performance. In performance, then, risk shifts from the perceived negative of engineers, actuaries, and businessmen, to artistic positive.

Drama has always delivered representations of danger and risk. One may surmise that early man, in acting out the story of a hunt, imitated the dangerous action for those who stayed behind. Greek tragedy certainly had references to danger even if the violence was kept off stage. In modern times representations of risk have come to include genuine risk for both performers

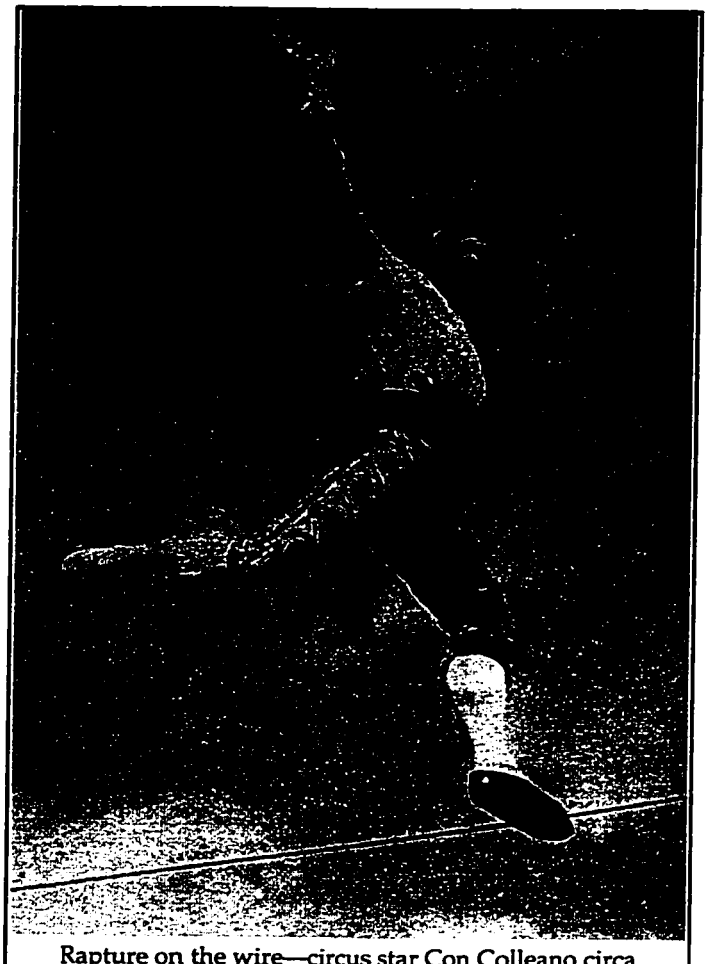
and audiences. There has always been risk and danger for circus performers whether the act is high wire, trapeze, or wild animal. Stage work seems a little safer, yet actors fall off platforms or are skewered in sword fights. Film making has many examples in which actions that appear dangerous or risky actually prove to be so. Pilot Paul Mantz crashed the special makeshift plane and died during the making of *Flight of the Phoenix* (1966); a driver died during the chariot race in *Ben Hur* (1959); and a woman was seriously injured running to get on a train in *Doctor Zhivago*(1965). All these instances were essentially unknown or imperceptible to the audience. Other movie risks are much more obvious and as result more thrilling to watch. In John Frankenheimer's *The Train* (1965), Burt Lancaster performs a breath taking stunt when he slides down a nearly vertical cliff face to sabotage a Nazi rail yard. Who can forget Steve McQueen jumping a motorcycle again and again over barbed wire fences in *The Great Escape* (1963)? Major stars taking major risks thrill audiences.

It this thrill that provides the *raison d'être* for performance risk and provides meaning for both wire walker and audience, for it is the thrill of life. As the artist puts his life on the line, the audience experiences the triumphal joy and exhilaration with him through empathetic connection. When he succeeds, the audience shares his elation. When he fails, the audience feels death a breath away.

Each wire walker studied in this thesis reports that life is intensified on the wire. Petit, in particular, seems almost giddy in his rapture. The living metaphor unfolds with each step as the walker conquers the danger and keeps snarling death at bay. There is something religious, almost holy about this. It

is no sacrilege to say that in a broad sense the wire walker is Christ-like in his journey and his triumph over death. This inspirational individual in the sky represents the circumstances and hopes of humankind. The intellectual and articulate Philippe Petit only speaks the truth when he immodestly states, "I have inspired them to look up. I have inspired them to move mountains. I have inspired them to grow wings" (Appendix B 156).

Defying death affirms life.



Rapture on the wire—circus star Con Colleano circa 1930 (Durant 200).

Appendix A

Jay Cochrane Interview
February 25, 1997
A verbatim transcription.

PM— Hello. My name's Paul Myrvold. I'm calling for Jay Cochrane.

JAY COCHRANE— Speaking.

PM— Mr. Cochrane, how wonderful. I spoke to Mike Wilson in Colorado and he suggested...

JAY COCHRANE— Hang on one second will you?

PM— Sure.

JAY COCHRANE— I'm sorry.

PM— Yeah, hi. I talked to Mike Wilson; maybe he mentioned me to you. I want to interview you for some work I'm doing on a master's thesis and also for some journal articles I'm preparing.

JAY COCHRANE— Uh-huh.

PM— Would now be a convenient time?

JAY COCHRANE— Now is as good as any. You caught me.

PM— He said I may or may not catch you at this number so...

JAY COCHRANE— I only arrived last night and I'm getting ready to leave again in a couple of days for China.

PM— I hear you're getting prepared for your walk in Harbin...

JAY COCHRANE— I am, I am.

PM— ...and, by the way that was a nice article on you in the Reader's Digest.

JAY COCHRANE— Thank you. Where are you calling from?

PM— I'm calling from Morgan Hill, California.

JAY COCHRANE— Oh, Morgan Hill. Oh, Reader's Digest just came out now, right?

PM— For us just now.

JAY COCHRANE— The Canadian edition came out in February and I understand that the European and Australian and English edition comes out in April. So it's kind of world wide circulation.

PM— It looks like the fame you deserve is catching up with you.

JAY COCHRANE— Well, if you pursue it long enough it will.

PM— I'm doing a master's thesis on the theme of risk in performance, focusing on the high wire because that is the exemplary metaphor for risk. It's almost gone beyond the actual act into the language as metaphor rather than as a reality and so in researching this I came across the news of your walk over the Yangtze River which I hadn't heard of. Here was this spectacular walk all this way and yet I hadn't heard anything about it.

JAY COCHRANE— Well in China I am surely well known.

PM— Very well known.

JAY COCHRANE— It's like ten Michael Jacksons going there. It's unbelievable.

PM— That's terrific. Anyway, I just have a few questions about the philosophy of walking, and how you got started and what you plan to do. Mike Wilson [Cochrane's manager] sent me some tapes. In an interview you mentioned Karl Wallenda. Was he your mentor?

JAY COCHRANE—Well, he was not a mentor. I had the opportunity of meeting Karl on numerous occasions. I was never taught under him or

worked under his auspices, but at one time was a member of the Wallenda troupe, but this was after Karl Wallenda had passed away. But I think that every wire walker at that time and at some point and time in their career was part of a Wallenda troupe.

PM— I see.

JAY COCHRANE— But it wasn't for a great extended period of time. But Karl Wallenda was a very great wire walker in his time. His name stands out; it's like a household word, like Evel Knievel. He one time told me... about twenty-one years ago as a matter of fact...in 1976 he looked at some of the work I had done in photographs and stuff and he looked at me—it was at the Ohio State Fair, [he] was doing a special thing for the Ringling show—and he looked at my stuff and he took me aside and in his German accent he said to me, "You are going to be the next Karl Wallenda. Not one of my family." And of course I thought then, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah sure," you know. He's just saying that to be nice to me. But little did I know. Never under estimate the old masters.

PM— The reading I've done indicates that one must learn wire walking from a master.

JAY COCHRANE— Pretty much so. It's not so much you learn from them as that you learn about them. Walking the wire is not so much the art as it is the self confidence and determination. It's like honing the skills of a theatrical artist. The more you practice it the better you get. The more opportunities you have the better you get and the more diverse you become, the more you are accepted and the more challenges you are given and the more challenges you accept, the more you are given. And you develop a

reputation. But you must also be safe.

PM— Now this brings me to the idea of risk. As I've been reading, I've read Philippe Petit and I've read many others, who simply deny that risk is involved.

JAY COCHRANE— Well, life is a risk. I've been in much more danger going to and from an engagement than I ever am up on the wire. Because we have developed a craft, an art, a form, a performance and we do the same performance all the time. When we do this, we're in familiar territory. It is like an artist or a dancer going out on the stage. They know where they are. This is what they do. An ice skater goes out on the ice and performs these fabulous feats, but that's what they practice. And though the ice is the same and it's in different buildings, the principle is the same. The techniques are a little bit different from place to place but the principle is the same and you develop a skill and you know a certain speed and a certain momentum you have to have in order to do the double axel or a triple axel or a salchow, what ever the case may be. The same applies to sky walking. Of course you have to be an engineer of sorts.

PM—Then you do engineer and supervise the rigging.

JAY COCHRANE—I have a master's degree in bridge and structural engineering. So when I speak to cities and people of various organizations in cities around the world, I speak their language. I speak engineering language, I don't speak circus language.

PM—I'm curious about the rigging of the Yangtze River walk. The wires usually have cavalettis coming down to stabilize the wire...

JAY COCHRANE—You read too much of Philippe Petit.

PM—I've read Philippe Petit. That's the only term I know. What do you...what term do you use.

JAY COCHRANE—They're called guy wires.

PM— Guy wires.

JAY COCHRANE—Cavaletti is a French term. That's what they're called in French—cavalettis.

PM—Yes, I confess. I have read Philippe Petit...

JAY COCHRANE—That's okay. That's all right.

PM—...but I'm curious. How were they rigged? They couldn't have gone to the ground.

JAY COCHRANE— They did.

PM— They did?

JAY COCHRANE— Yes.

PM— My.

JAY COCHRANE— Oh yes. Some of them were as much as three thousand feet in length.

PM— My.

JAY COCHRANE— Oh yeah, we had seventy-five miles of guide line wire—cavalettis—strung from the main cable. There were thirty-one tons of weight suspended above the river, 1360 feet above the river.

PM— The film that I have which was from Chinese television, wasn't able to show that. That's very impressive. How much sag was there in the wire at that distance?

JAY COCHRANE—The wire probably dropped 150 feet in the center.

PM— So half the time you're going down and half the time you're going up.

JAY COCHRANE— Exactly. It's like life. Like running around in a circle. Half the circle you're running up, half you're running down.

PM— I noticed that in some of the tapes that I saw, some walks you wear a harness to help support your pole.

JAY COCHRANE— I have only been doing this in recent years. Like the last half a dozen years or so or maybe a little bit more. As I started getting on in age—and I do longer and longer and longer walks and the pole weighs as much as sixty pounds— and to be able to carry that for an hour or an hour and a half is a tremendous strain. So what I did, I designed this shoulder harness that goes over my shoulders. It allows my body to carry the weight rather than just the pivot of my elbows and my forearms.

PM— So this is your innovation.

JAY COCHRANE— Yes. But it is not fastened to me.

PM— I could see that from the films.

JAY COCHRANE— I can lift the pole or do whatever I want with it. I have total control of it. This way my body will carry the weight.

PM— Did wind play a factor in the walk on the Yangtze.

JAY COCHRANE— Wind always plays a factor in any walk.

PM— Was it difficult? Did it present a danger to you on this walk?

JAY COCHRANE— Apparently not so.

PM—Well you survived and here you are.

JAY COCHRANE— I know when to say no. And I will always make the decision at the time of the walk. Because what you feel on the ground is not what you feel up there. It can be totally different.

PM— The reason I mention this and how I got involved in this research, and

I've been researching for now for about six months, is I saw a film on television of Karl Wallenda on his last walk. And it's really kind of horrifying...

JAY COCHRANE— Riveting.

PM—...riveting. Exactly. And the wind picked up and he started to lose it and I wondered, did he make a mistake in going across the wire at that moment.

JAY COCHRANE— I never really talk about it much. There are a combination of several things that lead to the demise of Karl Wallenda. It's a shame because he was a great wire walker. It was unnecessary, what had happened. The legend has it that the wind blew him off and we'll let legend keep his name aloft.

PM— That sounds fine with me.

JAY COCHRANE— And he is a legend. The greatest accomplishment—and I don't know if you have had a chance to see the W5 tape, whether Mike sent you that or not, that they did on me in CFTO in Toronto about my walk across Niagara that's coming up...

PM— No, he didn't send me that. That's another one of my questions. Is that [a walk across Niagara Falls] locked in?

JAY COCHRANE— Oh, it's on the move. Oh yes. There's two things you don't tell me. You don't tell me no and you don't tell me can't. I've been at it for thirty years and it is on the move, very much so. It will happen this year.

PM— Wonderful. Now are you walking actually across the falls or are you duplicating Blondin and going across the rapids?

JAY COCHRANE— We are working on several aspects. I have learned not to open my mouth too much because sometimes my foot sticks in it. There will

be a walk at Niagara. That you can guarantee.

PM— That's a thrill to me because the literature...

JAY COCHRANE— Well, it's the first time in one hundred years that it's ever been done. It's not been done in a hundred years. It has been approved by all the city councils. They've made a memorandum and a special thing for it that they will permit it this one time. And it can never be asked for, sought after, or granted again for another one hundred years. The greatest thing that man can have...it's great to be known when you're here...but the greatest accomplishment a human being can have is to be remembered long after he's gone. When I was a little boy my mother once asked me, "Jay, when you grow up, do you want to be rich or do you want to be famous?" And I said to her, "Mother, when I grow up if I am rich I may never be famous, but if I am famous I'll always be rich."

PM— Is walking across Niagara the holy grail of sky walking ?

JAY COCHRANE— For the moment. No one's done in a hundred years. When you think of Niagara, the first thing that comes to your mind is the man who walked across the wire. All over the world.

PM— His fame is legend.

JAY COCHRANE— The legend. It's time to relive history and what a marvelous way to do it.

PM— Are there any other wire walkers that you admire, living or dead?

JAY COCHRANE—There's not really any other ones that are doing it enough. Philippe Petit does some things once in a while but no one really does it on a full time basis like I do any more. I mean, this is all I do. I don't do anything else but. And I'm at it all the time, constantly. There were wire walkers that

work in circuses, of course. There was Harold Ozana. He was a great wire walker. Still alive as a matter of fact. Karl Wallenda of course was the most notable. And my mentor, her name was Mrs. Hanniford. Her stage name was Stroopy. Her stage name was Princess de Jana. She was my mentor. She taught me as an aerialist. I learned to do all kinds of aerial acts before I learned to do sky walks, of course. I've been the longest doing skywalks. I've been walking since 1970 doing skywalks. I am the longest living of any of them doing skywalks, living or deceased.

PM— I see from one of the tapes that Mike sent me that you pass on your skills.

JAY COCHRANE— Yes, I have nine students. I have four girls and five boys. I teach them to do the aerial acts like the trapeze and sway poles and motorcycles that I once did as a youngster. I teach them. I have one boy that quite possibly will take over in my footsteps. He's been with me about seven years. In about another six or seven years when I retire he'll be ready. It takes about fifteen years.

PM— Another aspect I'm interested in is the selection of your costumes. I noticed one that particularly struck me was the one with mirrors on it. Was that designed so as to catch the eye?

JAY COCHRANE—Was that the one in Shanghai at night time?

PM— I think so.

JAY COCHRANE— Well in Shanghai, it was so high. It had a lot of white and dark and it had wings coming from it. It had all kinds of... they look like mirrors, but they're actually quarter sized sequins specially fastened to the costume. It was because I was so high there people needed to be able to see it.

The reflections made it almost like an alien.

PM— I suspected it was a visibility... it was a practical choice. A stunning costume, but it was a practical choice of visibility.

JAY COCHRANE— Yes. I have many costumes and I choose them according to the type of event that I'm doing. When I walked the gorge, because it was day time, to wear a costume like that wouldn't have shown. So I wore something that was a darker blue than the sky was so I would show up against the sky. People would be able to see the dark figure.

PM— Were most spectators on the ground?

JAY COCHRANE— They were everywhere.

PM— Everywhere?

JAY COCHRANE— Everywhere. I mean hundreds of thousands of them. They climbed the mountains at two o'clock in the morning in the dark to see this. I have so many wonderful experiences from China. Believe me. I hear all these negative things in Western media and television about China, but they don't know the real China. They really don't. They know the government, they don't know the people.

PM— There was some controversy about the nature of your walk being a distraction for the...

JAY COCHRANE—Three Gorges dam project?

PM— Yes, the dam project.

JAY COCHRANE— Mm-hmm.

PM— I'm not particularly interested in the politics of it.

JAY COCHRANE— You'll be interested in how I handled it.

PM— Yes. Tell me.

JAY COCHRANE— This is not for publication of course.

PM— Yes.

JAY COCHRANE— My public relations firm told my manager, "Oh, you've got to talk to Jay. You know there's going to be all kinds of Western media there. And they're going to turn around, they're going to question him on the dam project, and this and that. He's got to be prepared." My manager at the time...who wasn't Mike then because I had another manager, and he had a massive heart attack at JFK airport on the way to see the walk in China. Mike was involved with me... and Mike happened to take over and he never made it. Four days before the walk. He was my friend and my business manager for sixteen years. So anyway, my manager said to them, his name was Bob Maxwell, the time he said to them, "Let me tell you something about Jay. Jay will be ready for the media. The media will not be ready for him." And when I arrived, they said to me, "Mr. Cochrane...," —western media, there were about five hundred news media people there from around the world—they said, "Are you aware of the Three Gorges dam project?"

I said, "Yes."

"What do you think of it?"

"What do I think of it?" I said, "I don't think of it. It's none of my business." I said, "I'm not here on a political venue. I'm here as an entertainer."

They said, "Are you aware blah, blah, blah. That it's going to do this, it's going to do that?"

I said, "No, I'm not. I can't really make a comment on it until I know more about it."

They said, "Would you like to make a comment about what you do know?"

I said, "Not really."

They said, "Well, we'd like to have something to give our readers."

I said, "Would you now?" I said, " Okay. You really want me to make a comment, I will."

And I turned to the six Chinese translators from Beijing and the two who came with me from America. I had eight translators. It takes eight of them to keep up with me. And I said to the translators, "Gentlemen. I would like you to translate what I am about to say word for word from English back into Chinese and don't change one word of it because my translators will tell me if you do."

And I said to them, "First of all, what business is it of ours as a Western culture to tell the Chinese that they should not build their dam? It is their country. Let them do what they want. When we built the Hoover, the Coulee, and the Tennessee dam, etc., did they tell us we should not build our dams? Of course not. And if they had, what would we have said to them? I'm sure it would not have been Merry Christmas. We seem to forget that two hundred years ago the Indians were chasing us across the desert. These people have been around for five thousand years. Something is to be said of that. Furthermore, it seems very strange to me...I don't lump all into this category, but a lot that I meet of journalists from the Western world—they only know how to print negative sensationalist stories. Do you not have the capacity or the capability to do a positive story? When you went to journalism school, did they not teach you how to do that? For once let's

show our hosts that we really can do a positive story with a good ending. Any more questions?" That was the last time I was asked about the Three Gorges dam project.

PM— You shut the door on them very well.

JAY COCHRANE— Well, I mean, it's not our business.

PM— I agree with you there.

JAY COCHRANE— Governments are governments, okay. And they're all corrupt. God knows, we should be throwing stones. Okay? We should be taking about governments? Yes, there are things over there that you see and we look at those people and say, "Oh, they're so poor and so depressed." But they don't know they're poor. The every day average person that lives in America is poor compared to people who live in Palm Beach...

PM— There you are.

JAY COCHRANE— ...or Beverly Hills. Those people would never be able to live like we do. Or the people who live below us in our own countries. They're just in a different standard. And to them, they don't realize they're poor. That's just a way of life. A lot of people said to me they said, "You just go to China, Jay, and you can just go any where you want and they just adore you. What is your secret?" Of course they say it with a little tongue-in-cheek type of thing. And I look at them and I say, "You really want to know the secret? I'll tell you. I go with an open mind and I leave my American attitude at home." We all have one and rightfully so we should. We have a great country. It's a great country. But we shouldn't try to enforce our opinions and our objectives on other people. They'll come around. They'll see how great it is. They'll come around. And they are, speaking of the

Chinese. They are coming around.

PM— All the evidence is there that they are.

JAY COCHRANE— Believe me. Have you ever been?

PM— No, unfortunately. I'd love to.

JAY COCHRANE— Let me tell you something. If the Western world could see what I have seen in the areas I have been. I have been in parts of China, when I went to do the Funxi walk, that had never seen blond hair, blue eyes, white Caucasian skin. Had never seen a helicopter. Have never heard of the United States of America or didn't even know what language I spoke. And here I come with an American Black Hawk Sikorsky military helicopter from the Chinese Army landing in their fields like a flying saucer landing and an alien getting out if it. We changed their lives. The mountain people never had electricity before we got there. What those people did for me was just incredible. Three thousand men and five hundred mules spent eight months building this project by hand, hammer and chisel, nothing else but by hand. They carried two hundred tons of concrete up the mountains for the footings. They made pathways and they built the second miniature Great Wall because they knew I was so impressed with the Great Wall that they built a second one for me all along the pathways on both sides of the mountain. Now instead of taking eight or nine hours for the mountain people to get to the river, they can get down in an hour and twenty minutes or an hour and a half. We changed their lives forever.

PM— How interesting. I had no idea of that particular aspect of it.

JAY COCHRANE— But, they changed mine too, forever. I'll never look at life the same again. If we could learn just two words from the

Chinese...people, people I'm talking about, not government, people...

PM— Yes.

JAY COCHRANE— ...if we could learn two words form them it would improve our nations by a thousand percent and those words are discipline and patience. And they have an infinite abundance of both and we have none as a whole. We want it now or yesterday.

PM— Yes, I see.

JAY COCHRANE— In my most recent trip there, I have found, just recently I have realized what it is that we have lost here in the Western World —and when I say Western World I mean all of it— we have lost the innocence of life. They still have that. The first words they learn in English, which is not very many, are the last words we forgot, please and thank you. I have so many unbelievable experiences and I am sure that I was sheltered and I only saw the best. And I know, I'm well aware, I've been around a long time, I know what their purpose of having me there. I know I'm kind of a propaganda tool. Here's this Westerner with blond hair and blue eyes who comes over and we take him here and we do a video here and we show the Chinese people how the Westerner...I understand, this is fine. I let it go so far. I know when to stop it. And I will never say anything negative on either side. The one thing my mentor always taught me, "If you don't have something good to say don't say anything at all."

PM— That's what my father used to say to me.

JAY COCHRANE— And the best things I ever learned in my life, all my life, was from the old timers. They would come to me and say, Jay, you need to learn to do this this way or this way, I listened because I knew they were

telling me for my benefit. They'd been there and done that.

PM— From their experience?

JAY COCHRANE— From their experience. They didn't need to hear it again.

PM— I have one sort of last question here. What is the meaning, what do you perceive as the meaning of your performance to the spectator?

JAY COCHRANE— The meaning of the performance to the spectator. Well, if you had asked me that five years or so ago I would have said, only because I only know Western culture, I would have said, "Will he make it or won't he?" And we don't want to see him fall, but if he does we don't want to miss it. Okay? But that's sensationalism. But having been to other parts of the world and seeing how other people react to it, they are so nervous for me. I don't know how to explain it, there are not enough words that can explain. You have to see the people's faces. You have to see how they react to you.

PM— They're involved. They're completely involved.

JAY COCHRANE— They're totally involved. You become part of them; they become part of you.

PM— Yes.

JAY COCHRANE— They adopt you as if you were one of their family.

PM— Yes.

JAY COCHRANE— And when I go there, they don't look at me or watch me, they study me. I one time saw a thing on the river banks and I had my photographers film it, the Chinese photographers. I said, "You've got to film this for me."

They said, "why?"

I said, "Because my Western friends will never believe this when I tell

them."

"But," they said. "this is normal, everyday life here."

I said, "You don't understand. Please, just take the footage of this, because I've got to have it. I just have to have it."

And I've used it several times. I'm talking about the central part of China; I'm not talking about their industrialized nation. Their industrialized nation, we better watch out, they're coming. Oh, yes. I mean put some of us to shame. Anyway, they bring the coal out of the mountains on the backs of the burros. Then they come along with the barges and they push these barges up against the river banks. And a hundred thousand men come out of the mountains with little bamboo poles with little buckets on the end and they begin to fill all these coal barges bucketful by bucketful. And I said to their foreman one day, "I have to ask this. But why don't you get a front end loader and do this? This is unbelievable."

And he looked at me, and Chinese don't smile very much, and he looked at me and said with a kind of a smile and a smirk on his face, and he said, in Chinese of course, "All you Westerners are the same."

And I looked at him and said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "We have 1.4 billion people. Do you have any idea how many that is?"

I said, "No, not really."

He said, "Well, let me tell you. We could take every man, woman and child out of the entire continent of North America and we wouldn't know they were gone. We wouldn't miss it. We would still have 1.2 billion left. He said, "They have to eat. Furthermore, what machine do you know that's

made anywhere in the world that will pick up [tape interference]? And if we had a machine like this what would we do with it? How would we get it here? We don't have roads. How would we operate it? And we can hire a hundred thousand men for a year for a lot less than we can buy one of these machines. And the human machine never breaks down." And he's right.

PM— Interesting philosophy.

JAY COCHRANE— Well, their life is like an ant. One grain of sand at a time. And before you realize it, it's like an ant pile. You sweep it away and five minutes later it's all back again. And that's exactly the way it is. It's a multitude. And that's how the pyramids were built, the same way. And they're changing, they really are changing. Their capitalism now is just unbelievable. It's just mind boggling. Shanghai is New York and Paris together. It's two New York Cities. They have department stores that make Bloomingdales look like Walmart or K-Mart. And people will say, "Is there that kind of money there?" There's so much money there they don't know what to do with it all.

PM— When is the date of your Harbin walk?

JAY COCHRANE— June 14th. I'm leaving probably this weekend or Monday morning on the way back to...

PM— You're starting the preparation for...

JAY COCHRANE— Harbin. We're meeting with the engineers and the contractors to get the footings ready because we're going to walk across a thing called the Sung River.

PM— S-u-n-g.

JAY COCHRANE— S-u-n-g river. It's a very famous river in Northern China

and I think it flows out of Russia, if I'm not mistaken. The distance will be about 2500 feet across and it's very flat so they've got to erect two crane towers. And the towers will be higher that any skyscraper they have there. The towers will be 400 feet in height. Forty story building.

PM—I see. Now, Mike was indicating that this is going to be a record breaking walk?

JAY COCHRANE— Yes. It will be the longest walk over any river ever done.

PM— What do you think about when you're getting out there. You're out there half way and, and ...the concentration has to be enormous.

JAY COCHRANE— It is.

PM— Do stray thoughts wander, do tunes wander through your mind?

JAY COCHRANE— Hope not so. [laughter] I have to keep a sense of humor about it. I was up meeting with a public relations firm the other day in Niagara and they were talking to me and they said, "You know, you are a publicist's, a public relations publicist's dream. Don't have to prompt you or nothing." No, I concentrate on what I'm doing. It sounds funny coming from me probably but the only real peace and quiet and serenity I have in my life is when I'm out there on that wire. Because there I'm in my world. I'm by myself with total concentration

PM— Other than an astronaut all by himself in a space capsule, I cannot think of a spot that is more alone than the sight of you out in the middle of the Yangtze River Gorge.

JAY COCHRANE— Exactly. And those people, those hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people, millions and millions and millions and millions and millions that watched it on television. It went live on television all over

China to a billion people.

PM— I did not know that.

JAY COCHRANE— They satellited it back to a billion people in China. And those people... it was really funny because as they drove me from my hotel, the people that were in the city that we left from and they took me to the helicopter site to fly me to the top of the mountain, everybody in the city had their television sets out. And you could see. The helicopter, they had cameras at the helicopter, cameras at the site and they were showing what was going on at the site and as I was sitting in the car (they didn't know I was in the car of course), as I was sitting in the car I saw all these televisions and I said, "Isn't this interesting. Here I am watching them getting ready to watch me." The only regret that I have is that I never get a chance really to spend a lot of time with the people. And you never realize, we're so caught up in the performance of the show that we never realize the number of people's lives that we really touch. And you asked me a little while ago what I think it is that the people want to see or do, I hope that when they watch me, and I know it happened in China, but I hope that when people watch me, it gives them a little encouragement. Maybe they're feeling down about something that's happened in their life. We've all been there. And maybe they'll look at it and they'll say, "You know, geez, if that guy can get up there and do that, I can certainly pull myself up by my bootstraps and get going." And maybe it will give them a little uplift. And if it helps just one person then it was worth it. I do a lot of charity work for children's hospitals. I raise a lot of money for different children's hospitals and organizations. In China I raised money for the children's schools in the various towns and cities I go to and I

donate all the proceeds.

PM— Wonderful. The sight of a man on a wire to me is a metaphor for human existence.

JAY COCHRANE— Mm-hmm. Life is balance.

PM— Balance.

JAY COCHRANE— I just take it to a greater extreme. Everything in life is balance. We balance our diet, our play, everything we do we balance. And if we don't, we get out of balance and we fall down.

PM— And there's peril.

JAY COCHRANE— There's peril. We get sick. If our hearts are not happy, they're sick, they're out of balance. Our minds, our bodies, the same. And on the wire it takes all three. The mind, the body, the heart and soul to be balanced in order to do it.

PM— It's terrifically inspiring and I've enjoyed my research. I'm just thrilled with this.

JAY COCHRANE— What is it you're doing, an article?

PM— This all sprung from scholarship. I'm an actor working on a master's degree in performing arts to support my other activities and also my interests. In devising a master's thesis, I came across an area of scholarship which has not been examined. No scholar has looked hard at the high wire. And I've done lots and lots of research but nobody has examined it. There's been no performance analysis, which is why I was so delighted when Mike was able to send me the film. Because you can't analyze performance unless you can see the performance.

JAY COCHRANE— Exactly.

PM— So I've got this whole gold mine of interest and area to study and bring to the scholarly arena. And out of this, as well, planning articles for scholarly journals —Tulane Drama Review, that kind of thing—and also some freelance articles. I've gotten a commitment from a local paper here for an article on you and what I'm doing and so forth.

JAY COCHRANE— That's terrific. That's terrific. When you get a chance, call Mike again and ask him for a copy of the W5 tape. You'll enjoy that because it's up close and personal.

PM— Okay.

JAY COCHRANE— And it's in English. It goes through my childhood days, where I began, how I began, who my mentors were, photographs, everything.

PM— Wonderful. That's what I need.

JAY COCHRANE— It's a mini-documentary on me.

PM— Great.

JAY COCHRANE— And what I'm working up to towards the fall. And you'll enjoy it. It has a little humor too it. It shows me teaching students. It shows the whole aspect of it. And it gives you a little bit of history of the other wire walkers over Niagara Falls. And if you'll be as kind as from time to time to keep in touch. I'm pretty hard to get a hold of but Mike is usually available or myself. And I have message service on all my units. And when you do do articles, if you'd be as kind as to clip it out and send it to Mike or myself. Let me give you my address.

PM— Okay.

JAY COCHRANE— I'm at 5208 Northeast 24th Street, Ocala, Florida, 34470. And my other telephone number is (352) 236-4011 and my fax is 2990.

PM— Great. Thank you. You've been so generous with your time. This really helps me enormously with this. If it's okay with you, if I have questions later could I...

JAY COCHRANE— Not a problem. And if I'm not available ask Mike and Mike is pretty good. He's got every bit of bio that's ever come out on me. He's got a great captive command of the English language and he knows exactly what you might need and so on and so forth.

PM— He was very forthcoming when I spoke to him.

JAY COCHRANE— How long ago did you speak with him?

PM— I just spoke to him a few days ago actually and the way I got him was, I didn't know how to reach you...

JAY COCHRANE— I was in Canada. I only got back last night

PM— The reason I even found Mike was I contacted the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco. I said, I have question, I'm doing this, I need to find out how I can get some film of Jay Cochrane.

JAY COCHRANE— Isn't that interesting.

PM— They put me onto...

JAY COCHRANE— That's where my passport is headed for today to have more visa stamps. In fact my Asian manager, his name is Ge Hai Ping and he lives in Vallejo, California just out of San Francisco.

PM—Oh, that's who I was ...Hai Ping Ge. Yes, yes that's who they tried to put me in...But he was gone. He was in China. But the lady there who works with him...

JAY COCHRANE— His wife.

PM— His wife... yes, okay, I didn't know... that gave me Mike's phone

number and from there one thing lead to another.

JAY COCHRANE— The Chinese consulate gave you Hai Pings' number?

PM— Yes.

JAY COCHRANE— They know me, they know Hai Ping very well there. I mean I kind of stick out like a sore thumb. Six foot tall, blond hair, blue eyes, white Caucasian skin which they're not. It's not hard to miss or not find me me in a crowd. Pretty hard to miss me. Anyway, thank you very much for calling.

PM— Well, thank you for your generosity.

JAY COCHRANE— You're very welcome, sir, and feel free to call anytime.

PM— Thank you so much.

JAY COCHRANE— Bye now.

PM— Bye.

Appendix B

Philippe Petit Interview

March 15, 1997

A verbatim transcription.

(Note: M. Petit speaks a colorful, fluent English loaded with idiosyncrasies. What follows is an unedited transcription of the interview. I have only added a word or two in brackets where the recording was indecipherable or clarity was needed. I have left in all the hesitations, grammatical errors, repetitions, unfinished thoughts, and circuitous syntax that mark any conversation.)

PHILIPPE PETIT— (Answering Machine) Hello this is Philippe Petit. If you would like to send a fax start your transmission now. If you would like to leave a message please do so after the beep. Thank you.

PM— Yes, hello Mr. Petit. This is Paul Myrvold in California...

PHILIPPE PETIT— (picking up phone) Hello, hello.

PM— Hello, Mr. Petit...

PHILIPPE PETIT— Hello, I'm here. How are you?

PM— I'm very good. I just want to let you know as I'm starting that I'm recording this, if that's acceptable to you.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes, absolutely. So I got your little letter and its great, thank you.

PM— Is that satisfactory? Oh very good, I'm glad you're satisfied. I was going over some material in my files, interviews that you had granted both to the ballet magazine and so forth. I was thinking about what I know about you

from both reading and from the film records and I'd like to begin by asking you what is the meaning of a man crossing the sky on a wire?

PHILIPPE PETIT— Well, for me there are many meanings and most of them are almost impossible to put into words and that's what is nice. There are hidden meanings I think that talk to some subconscious of ours because there is something universal about seeing a man balancing and traveling in mid-air. Maybe it touches in all of us the dream of flying which men have carried and are still carrying. We will never fly, of course, but there is something in us that makes us want to, so those who are traveling in mid-air, in a way, they carry our hopes and our dream of flying. And surprisingly, when I see another wire walker in the air, usually it's a bad one, in a sense, that usually it's somebody who doesn't really love to walk and do not put all their minds there, but it doesn't matter, even a bad wire walker has something beautiful to him or her because of that universal appeal, so to speak. So it carries, also, life itself. Because, what better metaphor than holding your life in your hands and going from one mountain to the other or one cathedral to the other? What better metaphor for life itself? Because, we also forget that life is short; it had better be lived to its fullest. So, again, when we look up and look at one of those walkers there, it is a...we can read that actually. It's like our life there and we should live to the fullest. We should carry our life in our hands through the short life that we have. And much, much more than that, to me, it's something that will always inhabit me and always change me even though the players sometimes are not up to their title. They forget the etymology of "high wire walker." They don't even walk anymore; they perform all kinds of ridiculous acrobatics and they forget the beauty of

walking for which I have put a quarter century of my life into research. But, anyway, that's my answer to that.

PM— Well, thank you very much. In your book *On the High Wire* and in at least one interview I have read, you deny that walking the wire is a risk for you. Would you explain that to me?

PHILIPPE PETIT— It's very simple. I think risk is an absurd, actually, an obscene concept in life. Again, going back to you-only-have-one and it's a very short one, to chance it , to risk, to not look left and right when you cross a busy avenue is stupid and even more than that. So, in whatever I do in life and in my wire walking work, I do not take any risk and I will simply be stupid or suicidal if I would do so. Many people do but I don't. So it's very simple. In the discipline of wire walking, how can you reduce the risk to zero? Well, technically, by being completely in control of the rigging and psychologically in control of what you're doing. Which means knowing your limits because we all have limits. And I do all that with passion because I happen to love what I do. And therefore there is no risk in what I do. There is a certain danger which is a noble danger but that danger, I frame it, I control it. But I do not take any risk and whenever there is too much wind I don't go on the wire. Whenever there is something that is not right in the rigging, I repair it before getting on the wire. And I don't let others put my wire up; I do it myself—of course with help. And therefore I am in no risk at all.

PM— I see. So this answers one of my next questions which is "Have you ever declined to perform because the conditions made the risk too great?"

PHILIPPE PETIT— I have a very big problem with that because I love it so much that at some point in the very strange chemistry of being hired

professionally to perform a high wire walk, at some point I am so engrossed in it that I want to do it; it becomes my life which is well understood and sometimes in my life I had to stop the process because of that risk. I was never able to say "no" to being involved in a performance even if things start going wrong. Except one time in my life I had to say no and it was in Switzerland. It was a big walk that we planned for years and the producer didn't fulfill his contract, which means he didn't continue to give me the tools to be able to have a safe walk. So a few days before the walk— the cable was already across— I had to have an international press conference and announce that for safety reasons, for not breaking the building, for not endangering the crowd, for not losing my life, for the first time in my career I had to say no to a walk. And it was a giant scandal. The producer, of course, tried to put back the guilt on me saying that I was afraid, that I was not able to walk. But fortunately, I proved that it was not the case. So once in my life, to not take a risk, I had to say no. And it was the most painful memory in my entire life as a wire walker.

PM— I see. My imagination goes with the walker and when I see a walker up there, I can only imagine what it must feel like. I've always wondered, when you are crossing outdoors, does the wind feel differently at a great height than it does on the ground?

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes, but you see, when you are probing the question of what it must feel like, first I think it's a very personal thing. If you study wire walkers in history and the modern time, you will see that most [are] circus people, circus oriented, acrobats, stunt men, daredevils or record breakers and you will find no artists in them. You will find nobody who draws a knot,

who writes a poem about the wire, who writes a book about the wire. So if you ask those people what do they feel, well, yes, you can ask them about the wind and this and that and you will get very little philosophical answer. If you ask me, I am not one of them. I learned by myself. I painstakingly discover and fight for discovering the world of the high wire. I find out it was not enough. I tried to make it enough in my own miserable, infinitesimal way and some people actually say I am [sic], in the past twenty five years, brought [sic] somehow the wire walking stunts into an art through my unique theatrical performance and my books and my vision. But any way, that is to say that if you ask me what I feel up there, you cannot add "what about the wind" because then there are two different worlds, one is technical. Yes,...

PM— Yes...

PHILIPPE PETIT— ... talk about the technical problem that the wind will present, and by the way, the wind is the mortal enemy of the wire walker. But I cannot give you a recipe of my feelings. My feelings are very unique for each performance and they have nothing to do with the wind, although sometimes the wind moves my feelings around and my thoughts.

PM— Then let me rephrase the question. How does the wind affect your performance in a technical way?

PHILIPPE PETIT— The wind is the enemy of the wire walker. So what I do is I study the wind for big walks. I go to the nearest meteorological bureau and I look at fifteen years or twenty years or more of data and I make my own little diagram which makes me aware what the weather could be like the day of the performance, if it's a performance imposed, the date imposed. Or if I have the

luxury to choose the date of the performance, then I look in those months and I decide when it's most likely to be windless. And then, also, as a professional wire walker, I have of course what we could call a trick of the trade, which is I know how to negotiate winds. I know what to do on the wire when the sudden wind comes. I know my limits—how much wind I can take, what balancing pole to choose for a windy day, what to do and what not to do. All that is part of the craft of wire walking and the wind is something that you are constantly, or I should say, I am constantly aware of.

PM— What part does the perception of risk play in the meaning of your performance?

PHILIPPE PETIT— None. Because there is no risk.

PM— Let me rephrase this. How do you think an audience's perception of the risk...

PHILIPPE PETIT— I don't care about that question...

PM— All right.

PHILIPPE PETIT— ...because the way I perform, it's a little bit, or it's completely like an artist or a painter taking a canvas and starting something. It is not from the beginning geared to the collector or the amateur of art or the sale or whatever. It is an expression. So you cannot start an expression by some politics or by some conniving after thoughts, before thoughts, or side thoughts. You only can start an expression because it burns within you and then [if] you're a writer you have to take a pen, you're a painter you have to take a charcoal, or you're a wire artist, and there are none besides me, and you have to get on the wire to express yourself. So, in that audience subject, and I've been annoyed a lot by that subject when I read about it because, again, the

only wire walking that one can witness these days is in show business and in show business the audience is extremely important. You have to make them applaud. You have to please them. You have to please the director of the circus. You have to please the agent. You have to play this game which I never even thought of playing and I certainly could not play because I express myself on the wire and I create theatrical performance and therefore it is theatre and theatre and politics don't mix. In my opinion, in my feeling, when I'm being asked to create a performance, I create a performance first on some kind of theme. Somebody—let's say they open a new opera house and they want me for the opening— I certainly will take into consideration the opera. But very often it is the architecture of the building or the natural geographic site that inspires me to create a certain kind of performance. Of course where I am...if I am in Japan, I will probably invite Japanese music to be a part of it and Japanese costumes to reveal their style. But never in that elaboration of the artistic part the audience exists. It doesn't exist. It doesn't exist the day of the show when they come in. And, actually, in most theatrical performance you don't look at the audience; you don't mingle with them. Only amateurs do that. Amateur clowns go in the audience before. Amateur comics come in the room and feel what kind of people they have tonight. But real artists, they go in the back and it's a curtain. Actually, the curtain doesn't exist anymore in America, but it's a very important wall between the audience and the artist. And the artist needs the audience and shares with the audience only, in my opinion, at the moment of the performance. If it's before, it's almost a sacrilege. You don't invite the audience backstage to see you put your make up [on] or your costume and

rehearse. You don't. Or you do in a very special way sometimes, only on a film or in a book, you share the backstage with the audience. So that being said, I have absolutely no connection with the audience except the real important moment which is when I share, I offer, I give my performance. And yet I need an audience, if not, I am rehearsing in my garden. And in that sense I do not care if the audience marvels, detests, cries, all those things. I care after. I am interested what the audience response was. But during the show, I am too busy doing my performance and I should not care. And a good actor should not look at the audience. It is a very strange theatrical miracle being exposed there on stage, and my high wire is my stage, completely disregarding the audience. And this noble disregard is actually what makes very interesting and important and meaningful theatrical performance. And you can tell in two seconds an actor who is a bad actor because he acknowledges the audience and a good actor because he is prisoner of his own world that he offers to the audience. So I am of the latter kind.

PM— Pursuing this just a little bit. I am an actor myself...and onstage I can feel or sense a connection to the audience. Do you feel this kind of connection?

PHILIPPE PETIT— Absolutely. And it is very important to feel it because if you don't feel it, then you are insensitive. When I say the actor should lock himself or herself in his own world, it is not blind and ear-less and nose-less. It is with all the senses décupled [note: a word from the French meaning "a tenfold amount" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*)], so you feel, you hear, you can almost grasp the audience. But it is not to yell to it. Actually, on the high wire, to be specific, I often can hear the murmurs of the

crowd even if they are miles away or hundreds of yards away. I am very, very sensitive. I hear them much better than in any other situation. My eyesight goes very wide. My fan of looking goes almost to the side of my ears. All my senses are kind of décupled.

PM— I see. And even at as great a height as the World Trade Center you can feel...

PHILIPPE PETIT— Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I could perceive from the walk between the twin towers, I could see the traffic, the people moving toward the plaza. They were like little ants and they were slow motion-like. And I could hear the sirens of the police and the brouhaha below and the orders and counter-orders of the authorities. And I could hear the cheers of the people when I was taking a bow and saluting the towers. I could hear a response that came from a quarter mile below...

PM— My goodness.

PHILIPPE PETIT— ... and grew up to my ears. Oh, yes. Absolutely.

PM— There's no film that I know of your World Trade Center crossing.

PHILIPPE PETIT— No, and that's another great thing. You know I am completely misunderstood and, actually, it's almost a blessing, because this country is in awe of daredevils and when you mention the word high wire walker or tight rope walker, immediately people are thinking of circus and acrobats and all those things. So when I came specially in this country in 1974 with the idea of putting a wire illegally between the twin towers, I never thought of becoming rich and famous, which doesn't interest me in itself. As a tool, it is probably very interesting to be very well known and very rich and I would use it as a tool if it were to happen to me. But, to me, it was almost a

mystic or certainly an artistic presentation. And I didn't just walk across. I was not trying to be the first one, the highest and all that. I did seven crossings. I did almost three hours on the wire. And it was the strangest street show I could conceive of. But it was a performance. So...um...I don't know what the question was.

PM— According to the New York Times, you laid down on the wire and that you hung by your feet.

PHILIPPE PETIT— No, I didn't hang by my feet. You know, journalists...

PM— I had a hard time imagining that.

PHILIPPE PETIT— No, no.

PM— What embellishments or did you perform some of the exercises...

PHILIPPE PETIT— I did several u-turns because I couldn't actually go to the tower. The police were waiting for me on both sides. I lay down what seems endlessly on the wire. I kneeled. I did some salutes on one leg and all kinds of variations of choreographic poses on the wire.

PM— In your book...

PHILIPPE PETIT— Which book?

PM— *On the High Wire...*

PHILIPPE PETIT— Oh, I see.

PM— ...which is the only one I have been able to get so far, you scorn the use of safety devices. How far does the use of "mechanics" devalue the performance of the high wire walker?

PHILIPPE PETIT— How would you like to see a bird on a leash? Is that a bird? I don't think that is a bird. An animal in a cage is not an animal, it a slave, a dying creature. So that answers exactly that. A high wire walker

should walk. They all have forgotten that. It is easier to go on a seven man pyramid and a bicycle and triple somersault. But actually the most beautiful thing you can do on a wire, and the most difficult, is to walk. What was your question again?

PM— You seem to have answered it. I said "Does using a mechanic render the act meaningless?"

PHILIPPE PETIT— Oh, it's grotesque. It's ridiculous. I mean, can you do bull fighting with some security device? You have to choose in life. Either you are strapped to a comfortable arm chair or you're a life-and-death man. High wire walking and [a] contraption to protect your life is an obscene proposition.

PM— Well, then, you are familiar with Cirque du Soleil?

PHILIPPE PETIT— Sure.

PM— I have a film of their performance *Saltimbanco* and a young woman performs some amazing feats on the high wire such as somersaulting from a higher wire to a lower one and then back again, but she has a mechanic. And I was very disappointed when I saw it.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Ah, that's very interesting. That's good.

PM— I have read your work and you've won me over to your point of view and yet she does some amazing things. I'm sure she could probably do these things without the wire...

PHILIPPE PETIT— No, no...she will kill herself...

PM— She will?

PHILIPPE PETIT— ...one day and that will be the end of her.

PM— I see.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Of course not. She would not even attempt those without

the mechanics because she might lose her life. So that's the end of that.

PM— So then the display of the skill is not enough?

PHILIPPE PETIT— You see you have to choose in life. Are you in the commerce of trading cheap miracles or are you an obsessed mad man that has to express your art? If you are of the former, then, of course, the safety belt should be your way of living. But if you are of the latter, then really there is no room in any art for a cheating device. Or if you use [a] cheating device, you should use them to enhance and enrich you own perception and work, but not as an end, not as a means. It works for life, too. It works on everything. You have to choose to be honest with yourself or to go every night to sleep with the knowledge that you are a cheater. But I condemn it in a philosophical way because some of the performances are beautiful. You can do twelve somersaults from one wire to another and it could be choreographically pleasing and there is nothing wrong with that. With beautiful music it is a beautiful show. But don't call yourself a wire walker. Don't boast that actually it's you and the wire and your life in your hands. Cheating should not be condemned per se. But if we're talking about art and if we're talking about absolute then there is no cheating. And that's the beauty of it. When you are on the high wire you should hold your life in your hands. You have an incredible feeling and the people below will feel very different than if you have twelve safety belts. And nobody would have to have an explanation. It's a feeling. You can tell a painting from a master from a little coloring of a, I don't know what, plagiary [sic].

PM— That brings me back to my earlier question about the perception of danger and what that means in the performance and you just answered that

question very nicely.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yeah, but you know, danger also needs definition because it is used in many ways. The perception of danger is something that ...ennoblishes [sic]...I don't know the exact words exist...you know, gives nobleness...

PM— Yes, ennobling.

PHILIPPE PETIT— ...yes, to your life and to your work. And danger is in my opinion a necessary ingredient in the cooking of an artistic life. The danger is a little bit the frame by which the work of art is kept, I don't know, grand and alive. If there was no danger, and I'm talking about physical and psychological danger, in the life of an artist, there will be very poor results. So that danger in a way is the boundary, is the wall that prevents people to [sic] trample upon sacred land, the sacred land of art. I don't know if it's probably very stupid to talk like that, but I'm trying to explain that if you didn't need thirty years of practice to become a card magician or fifty years of practice to become the world's best violinist it would be a shame that anybody could just pick up a violin and in ten minutes play something. Well, it's wonderful you can't. It creates a boundary between the people who play with life from the tip of their finger and put no soul in nothing and the people, the mad people, who put their life into something. Thank God there is difficulty, technique to be overcome, danger that creates a wall around those fields. Thank god.

PM— In an interview you were quoted as saying, "By the time I walk, the unknown has been reduced to zero." But in your film "Concert in the Sky," you seem to indicate that the forward and backward somersault at the end of the performance were unplanned. With this in mind, is improvisation on

the wire part of your performance?

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes, always, always. Unplanned, but rehearsed for fifteen years. Unplanned that night.

PM— Unplanned that night but part of your repertoire.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes. As a magician, I am, to give you an example, practicing one move of one card for the past three years and only now can I present it to the public in a magic trick. So this backward somersault I spent years and years learning and perfecting. But yes, on the high wire, in my performances, there is always some part for improvisation and it gives me this extra feeling inside of me and this extra look for the audience that is a kind of blessed freedom, I was told. I think it should be in any actor's work—a certain amount of room for improvisation.

PM— I have my own notions about this question, but I would like to hear it from you. Would you identify those elements that transform your performances into art rather than mere stunts or circus acts?

PHILIPPE PETIT— I am against that because I think you have to, again, choose—either you dedicate yourself to create and you don't have much room to analyze your creation. And some others, people I kind of resent a lot, the psychiatrist, the mind dissectors, will, like vultures, take your work, probably when you're dead, and will say, "Oh, he became a wire walker because he was unhappy when he was in his childhood," or "He had to show his powers," or "He had to be on a stage." All those things. And people will find, or believe they catch, the reasons why you perform your miracles. It's a little bit bothering. And I think there is nothing much more interesting in life than to don't ask why, than to not know why. And, for example, one of

the questions I have been asked most is, "Why did you put your wire between the twin towers?" Well I never answered that question and I probably don't really know. I know the not-why. I know it was not to become rich and famous. If not, I would have accepted all the commercials afterward and become instantly a millionaire, which I am not. I think it's nice to leave the miracle of creation alone and not probe too much. At the same time, one cannot help, in one's search and research, to try to probe a little bit into it. But I would not want to know really the why too much.

PM— I not surprised by your response and I feel that analysis of a work of art is for the perceiver rather than for the artist.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes, yes. I am very interested actually when I read an account after a performance. I am interested to see the perception of the one below and sometimes they put the meaning to my work that I didn't have at all. But that's fine. Everybody finds their own meaning in anything. I talk a lot of inspiring. Because I have felt, after a performance, the feedback from my audiences show[s] that I have inspired them. I have inspired them to look up. I have inspired them to move mountains. I have inspired them to grow wings. So I can say that because I have been told that. That I inspire people when I do my work.

PM— Referring to the performance at the Denver Center, you created in that performance two distinct characters— a street juggler and acrobat who seems hesitant and uncomfortable on the wire and then a change of costume and out steps this elegant figure in white, supremely confident. That second figure evoked in me a response as though I was seeing a figure from a bygone time. The thought that came to mind was that it was as close as I would ever

get to seeing Blondin. Was that part of your intention?

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes, yes. But I should also... when you say I created characters... this show which, now, when I look at it I kind of giggle because it's so outdated and I have developed my art in a very different way. But, anyway, this show to me was a milestone in my work because for the first time in my life I projected two characters— one that existed for many years and continued to exist, which is me as a street juggler. Actually, that was my first work, besides magician at six years old, and around sixteen I started as a street juggler in France and then all over the world. I created throughout, now thirty years of work, a comic character and I performed fifteen years in Paris, twenty years in New York, and I keep performing all over the world. So I thought this character should meet the wire walker, the opposite, the man in the sky. So all black in the street and, then, all white in the sky and I wanted them to meet, but I thought it was very hard and finally this performance gave me the opportunity to dare to do so. So, although the performance in my opinion now is really childish and not really well conceived and directed and performed, it was still a very moving moment for me to have the street juggler not so much meet, but become through the use of different levels and different wires, the man in the sky. And yes, the man in the sky is, as you well put it, is untouchable. He is a supreme gliding presence. And, yes, I wanted it that way, all white and all in perfect control of his step in mid-air.

PM— I can only imagine the difficulties of a blindfold crossing. Technically, how does being blindfolded increase the difficulty?

PHILIPPE PETIT— For me, it's very easy. It's not difficult at all. I hate it

because it's really a symbol of circus work and I really dislike to use the wire as a showcase to give the audience bits and pieces of acrobatic feats. It's completely uninteresting and I don't do that anymore unless maybe it is called for a specific reason. But, surprisingly, as I was learning by myself wire walking around fifteen, sixteen years old, one of the first things I toyed with [was the] blindfold. The real blindfold, because in the circus, because of course if you've studied circus, you know that there's no such thing as a real blindfold. They all put a blindfold and three layers of whatever, but you can see through. But the real blindfold is actually a great exercise for a wire walker. But I hate to have done it and I hate to do it. Artistically speaking it's really trying to prove something. But sometimes it could be amazing. Maybe in a film or in a special performance that not only you walk in mid-air but you have created another difficulty, another barrier, and maybe you have created another continent which is to see more because your eyes are closed. But to answer your question— technically for me, Philippe Petit, it's a very easy thing. I can go back and forth blindfolded even without balancing pole which I think I am the only one that can do that. Maybe because I listen a lot to the other sense[s] of balance, other than what your eyes give you. And there are a lot. For example, the weight of the balancing pole, although vague, indicates in your finger tips the sense of the vertical. And then your feet gliding on the wire, which nobody does because gliding is slippery, also gives you a sense of the horizontality. So I am listening to those senses and I can do the real blindfold but I am completely against it and I find it silly.
PM— I'm nearing the end of my questions, at least for this session. You mentioned that your book...in French, I forget the title...

PHILIPPE PETIT— There are four books. I have written eight books, but four are out. They are all out of print at this moment except *Funambule.*

PM— *Trois Coups* is no longer in print?

PHILIPPE PETIT— The only place on earth where on can actually find those books is at the gift shop of the Cathedral of Saint John, the Divine. The reason is that I am the artist-in-residence there. They sell my books there. They are all out of print. I can give you the books for your information. The first was *Trois Coups* from Le Chaine in France. It tells the story of my three major illegal walks— Notre Dame, Sydney Harbour Bridge, and World Trade Center. It's in French. So that you can find at the Cathedral. The other book is the first book in America, which is *On the High Wire* from Random House, you have.

PM— I have, yes.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Which was actually translated by Paul Auster who is now a very famous writer. Then there is *Funambule* which is in French, publisher Albert Michel in Paris. It's also at the Cathedral. The whole book is about the amazing and disgusting story of putting a wire at the Eiffel Tower 700 yards long and 110 meters high for the bicentennial. Working with Chirac there. So, it's the whole story of that, so to speak, and it has a little taste of the history of wire walking. I am actually currently working on a giant book, the world's story of wire walking. There is one coming out in fifteen days which is *Treaté de Funambulisme* (Treatise of Wire Walking) in France. It's actually not out yet; it's being composed.

PM— Now I can purchase these through the Cathedral? The address there...

PHILIPPE PETIT— 1047 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, New York 10025

and it should say Cathedral Shop, Cathedral of Saint John the Divine.

PM— I have tried to track down a copy of *High Wire*, the film and had no luck in finding their production company which I think is no longer in existence. Is that film available anywhere where I could purchase it?

PHILIPPE PETIT— No, no. I have a lot of films out but none are commercially released. I don't know, if you would really like to have a copy I could put some of the people who work on the business side of my work, I could put them in touch with you and they could tell you how a copy could be obtained through them or something like that.

PM— Well, that would be great.

PHILIPPE PETIT— I could do that actually. The person who is my production director, her name is Cathy O'Donnell.

PM—Cathy O'Donnell

PHILIPPE PETIT— Cathy with a y and O' Donnell, double n-e-double l...

PM— Yes.

PHILIPPE PETIT— So, I will ask her in a couple of days because she has the contact with the production or the people who produced the film. And then she will see if...I'm sure she can find out if a copy is made...like VHS will be fine?

PM— Yes, yes. Excellent.

PHILIPPE PETIT— And then to you upon paying them. A simple thing.

PM— This is how I got a hold of *The Concert in the Sky* which is no longer available. I contacted Centre Productions in Colorado and they made a copy for me.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes, yes, okay, so then we could do that. I make a note of

it.

PM— Very good.

PHILIPPE PETIT— But there are many other films. For example, National Geographic made a portrait of me called *The Portrait of Philippe Petit.* And they spent six months following me around the world. Actually it is a much more interesting film than the Sissel film of the cathedral walk. Outside, was very close to... I don't know. It was a very windy day. It was... it's not one of my favorites. But this National Geographic portrait...

PM— *Portrait of Philippe Petit?*

PHILIPPE PETIT— Yes. Actually it was one of their best of the year.

PM— I'm sure they would be happy to sell me a copy and I will contact them.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Well, you cannot recommend yourself from me because I had a giant fight with them because they betrayed me in that film. But, anyway, that is beside the point. Contact them. That is a very nice little film, actually. And then there is my biggest walk, my two biggest walks [were] the Eiffel Tower. There was a French film made of that called *Tour Eiffel.* And then there was a film made of my biggest walk in Germany in front of five hundred thousand people between a church and the cathedral in Frankfurt. So that is also the subject of a film that is actually being sold in Germany. Eventually I can have Cathy list those different films and some ways to get them, maybe.

PM— Wonderful.

PHILIPPE PETIT— She must be able to get VHS copies, so through her she could tell you, if you would like to purchase them.

PM— I would be happy to buy those because it adds immeasurably to my

thesis.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Hold on a second. So *ET* and Frankfurt and National Geographic. Actually National Geographic you could get from them but actually they are...I don't know... there's not much communication because of the fight we have. They might not welcome—it's such a giant organization, they might not welcome somebody on the side trying to get a miserable cassette. We might as well add that if it makes your live easier. You can decide that. And what is the other film?

PM— *High Wire?*

PHILIPPE PETIT— And *High Wire.* That's four films. I can have Cathy work on that. She'll make you a little proposition of how to deal with it.

PM— Very good. Excellent. I'm at the beginning of preparing and writing this and I will be coming to the end later on. As I near the end, if I have follow up questions could I contact you again.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Absolutely. Because the point is for me to help you in what you're doing.

PM— Thank you so much

PHILIPPE PETIT— You are welcome.

PM— And thank you for your generosity and your conversation.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Okay. I wish you good work.

PM— Yes, I remember Spring is beautiful in New York. Thank you so much.

PHILIPPE PETIT— Okay. Talk to you later. Bye-bye Paul.

WORKS CITED

Apter, Michael J. *The Dangerous Edge: The Psychology of Excitement.* New York: The Free Press, 1992.

Australia: Nine Contemporary Artists. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1984.

Ayres, Anne and Paul Schimmel, curators. *Chris Burden: A Twenty-Year Survey.* Newport, California: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1988.

Banks, G. Linnæus. *Blondin: His Life and Performances.* London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1862.

Carr, Cynthia. *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993.

Carroll, John M. *Managing Risk: A Computer-Aided Strategy.* Boston: Butterworths, 1984.

Cirque Du Soleil: Saltimbanco. Dir. Jacques Payette. Les Production Télémagik Inc. with the participation of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, La Société Radio-Canada, Le Group Multimédia Du Canada, 1994.

Concert in the Sky. Dir. Mark Eliot. Centre Productions, 1984.

Daniels, Don. "A Conversation with Philippe Petit." *Ballet Review* Summer, 1993: 52-66.

Daredevils. Director: Patrick Leigh-Bell. Cinetel Productions in association with A & E Network. Executive Producers: Stephen Land and Patrick Leigh-Bell. Producer: Geoffrey Proud. Host/Narrator: Regis Philbin. 1996.

Disher, M. Willson. *Pleasures of London.* London: Robert Hale, Ltd., 1950.

Douglas, Mary. *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory.* London: Routledge, 1992.

Durant, John and Alice. *Pictorial History of the American Circus.* New York:

A. S. Barnes and Company, 1957.

Fischoff, Baruch et al. *Acceptable Risk.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Great Wallendas, The. Dir. Larry Elikann. With Lloyd Bridges, Britt Ekland, Taina Elg, Cathy Rigby, Michael McGuire, John Van Dreelen. Daniel Wilson Productions, 1978.

Hertz, David Bendel and Howard Thomas. *Practical Risk Analysis: An Approach Through Case Histories.* New York: Wiley, 1984.

Jones-Lee, M. W. *The Economics of Safety and Physical Risk.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

Kehrer, Daniel. *Doing Business Boldly: The Art of Taking Intelligent Risks.* New York: Times Books, 1989.

Keyes, Ralph. *Chancing It: Why We Take Risks.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985.

Lichtenstein, Grace. "Stuntman, Eluding Guards, Walks a Tightrope Between Trade Center Towers." *New York Times* 8 August, 1974: 20.

McGrath, John Edward. "Trusting in Rubber." *The Drama Review.* Summer, 1995, v. 39, no. 2, p. 21-38.

Morris, Ron. *Wallenda: A Biography of Karl Wallenda.* Chatham, NY: Sagarin Press, 1976.

Murray, Marian. *Circus: From Rome to Ringling.* New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956.

Myrvold, Paul. *Interview with Jay Cochrane.* Unpublished. February 25, 1997.

Myrvold, Paul. *Interview with Philippe Petit.* Unpublished. March 15, 1997.

Petit, Phillipe. *On the High Wire.* New York: Random House, 1985.

Proulx, Zotique. *How to be a Wire Walker.* Chicago: Roylance Ptg. & Eng. Co., 1896.

Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956.

Siegelman, Ellen Y. *Personal Risk: Mastering Change in Love and Work.* New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

"Skywalk over the Yangtze River: Fengjie County, Sichuan, People's Republic of China. October 28, 1995." China Central Television and Asia Satellite Feed. (Video footage provided by Mike Wilson, Pacific Attractions International, Berthoud CO 80513.)

Sprinkle, Annie. *Annie Sprinkle's Home Page.*
http://www.heck.com/annie/sprinkleshow.html
http://www.heck.com/annie/cervixmain.html

Stott, R. Toole. *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography (1500-1957), Volume One.* Derby, England: Harper & Sons, 1958.

_____. *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography (1500-1957), Volume Two.* Derby, England: Harper & Sons, 1960.

_____. *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography (1500-1957), Volume Three.* Derby, England: Harper & Sons, 1962.

_____. *A Bibliography of Books on the Circus in English from 1773 to 1964.* Derby, England: Harper & Sons, 1964.

"The Wire." *Time* 9 August, 1948: 20.

Wallenda, Delilah and Nan De Vicentis-Hayes. *The Last of the Wallendas.* Far Hills, NJ: New Horizon Press, 1993.

Williams, Hugo. "Freelance." *Times Literary Supplement* 16 February, 1996: 16.

Wilson, Mike. "100,000 Chinese Witness Jay Cochranes' 'Skywalk' Across Yangtze River." Press release. Pacific Attractions International: Berthoud, CO 80513, 1995.

Wilson, Mike. Promotional still photos. Pacific Attractions International:

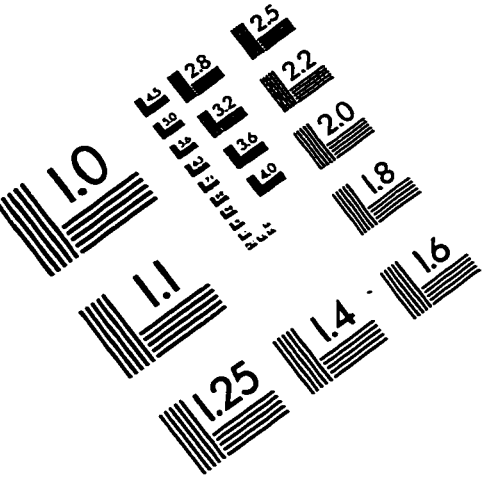
Berthoud, CO 80513, 1995.

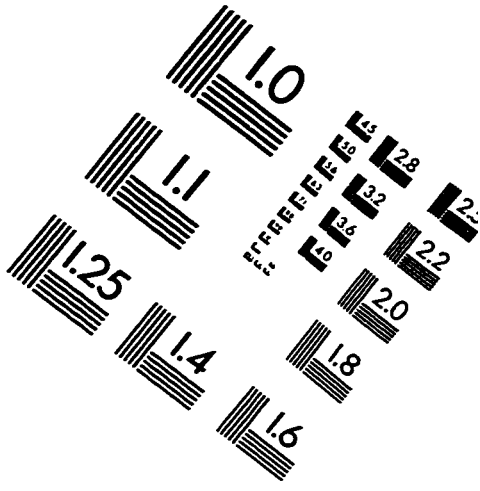
Wilson, Mike. Promotional video. Pacific Attractions International: Berthoud, CO 80513, 1995.

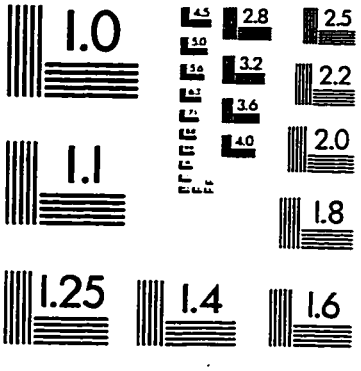
Winchester, Simon. "The Great Skywalk." *World Press Review*. March, 1996: 23.

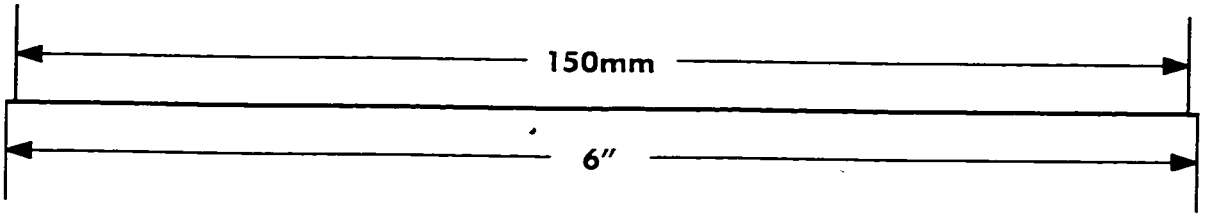
Yates, J. Frank, ed. *Risk Taking Behavior*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1992.

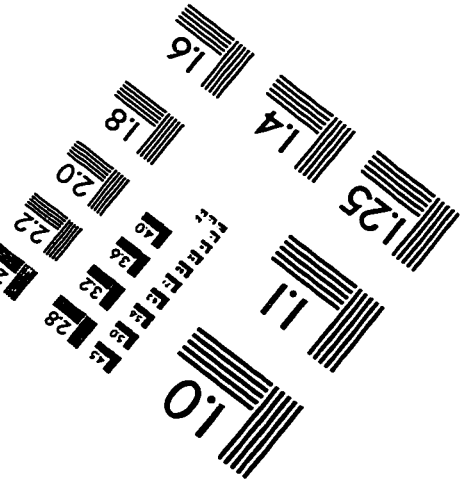
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

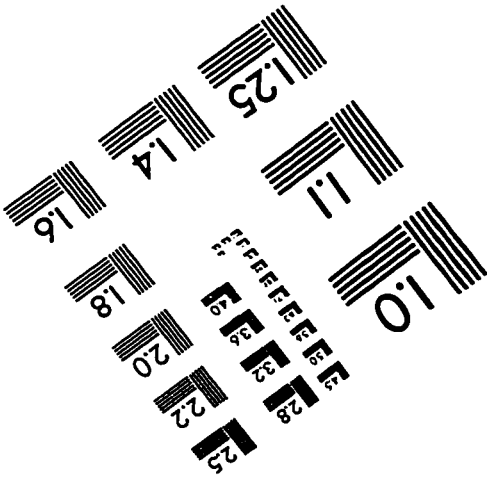












APPLIED IMAGE, Inc
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989